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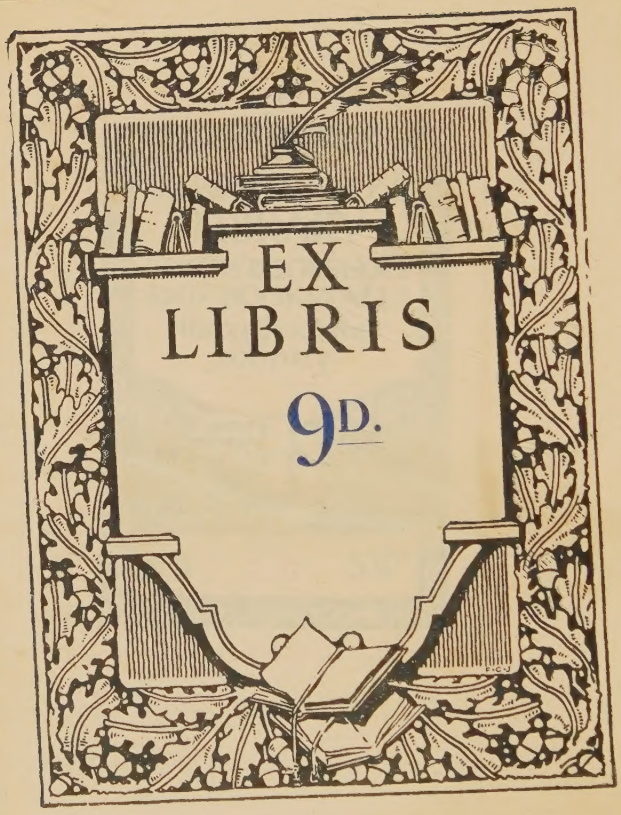
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THE NARROW WORLD

by

PRISCILLA JOHNSTON

DUCKWORTH
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I

IT was warm enough for midsummer although only April, and Joyce's bare legs were already quite tanned. She was sitting on a low stone wall in the great sunlit garden of her home, the home that she was to leave so soon. She drummed on the wall with her heels and screwed her handkerchief, already rather the worse for wear, into a tight little ball. The ball was very damp. Once more she passed it guiltily across her eyes, then stuffed it into her knickers.

"This is rot," she thought, "and I'm a fool. I don't a bit mind going really, and, anyway, I'm much too old to stay at a day-school any longer; I'm glad I'm going—I'm glad." But she knew she was not. The first time of leaving home is always very frightening.

"I wonder," she thought suddenly, "what it really will be like?"

For some time she forgot her sorrows in a sense of excitement and of the wonders of the life on which she was about to enter. She wandered in a fairyland of imagination. She saw herself the most popular girl in the school, brilliant at everything she put her hand to, the terror of the staff, the idol of the lower forms, leading her companions to victory over tyrannical mistresses—a fly was tickling her arm, she moved to brush it away and the charm was broken. She came to earth with a bump. There was the adorable garden still, and the home where she was all important, but for so short a time. At school she would be nobody. Even if she

should fulfil her wildest dreams there would be a time before she gained fame and popularity, a time when she would be only one in a huge herd, and a very insignificant one at that. A little helpless atom, she would be, lonely and friendless, drifting on that great current. Why could she not make time stand still and stay at home for ever and ever? She laid her wet face against the hot slabs of stone which formed the top of the wall on which she sat, and somehow drew comfort from their warmth. But to think of wearing stockings all May and June and nearly all July—*woollen* stockings! The thought sickened her. Suddenly she could not bear to be alone another moment. She must find Dick or Alan or her mother or somebody—anything, anybody to stop this eternal thinking. She jumped off the wall and ran into the house.

* * * * *

The big front door shut and Joyce was alone—alone in a world she knew nothing about, and in which was no single person whom she had ever seen before. Miss Western, her future house-mistress, approached her and said something, her voice sounded quite benevolent, but Joyce was incapable of fixing her attention on her. There were so many other things to think of and so much to see and hear, and even to smell. Everywhere she went in this vast place there were strange new smells. Here, in the house-mistresses' private rooms was only the quiet, carpeted smell of respectability, but outside in that howling wilderness of bare boards and perpetual noise and hurry, out there, as Joyce soon found, were strange and ominous smells. There was the damp, depressing smell of the dining-room, the floor-polish smell of the passages, the clean, white smell of the bedrooms, the washy, unpromising smell when one passed near the kitchen,

and above all the horribly schooly smell of the " prep-room."

A girl came into Miss Western's hall from the door which led to the school. Joyce heard Miss Western say " Oh, Laura, this is Joyce Aylmer, will you show her round? Find out where she is sleeping and see that she is all right."

" Yes, Miss Western."

The girl turned to Joyce. " Come on," she said briefly. Joyce followed her out of the room and up some stairs, but she walked so fast and dashed upstairs and round corners in such a way that she was in terror of losing her. But it was only the normal school pace, to which Joyce soon became accustomed. She presently found herself quite safe and only a yard or two behind her guide, at one end of a long corridor. Then there broke about them the great tide of noise inseparable from a big school—the sound of many voices, talking, laughing, shouting, singing, and endless unknown feet beating on the bare wooden floors. Joyce heard it all and felt more sick and lonely than ever.

The girl in front of her had dark-brown bobbed hair, brown eyes, and a brown skin. Joyce thought she looked all right and wondered what she was thinking about and whether they would one day be friends, and if the passages went on for ever. Suddenly the girl turned and smiled at her and she felt better.

" My name is Laura," she said, " Laura Acton," and added " I expect you are sleeping here," opening a door in the wall of the corridor as she spoke. Joyce followed Laura through the door, and found herself in a long room with rows of beds down each side. Laura walked down the room inspecting little labels which were pinned to the dressing-tables. Near the end she stopped and pointed at one.

" This is you, isn't it? " she asked.

Joyce went and looked at the label, on which was written "J. Aylmer," and agreed that it was; she put down her hat and case rather wearily on the bed and got out her keys. She was beginning to unpack her case when Laura called to her from the other side of the room.

"I'm sleeping here."

"Thank heavens!" said Joyce.

"Why?"

"I should be frightened by myself."

"Oh rot!"

"Yes, I should, with all people I'd never seen before—Oh, I should be terrified!"

"You've never seen me before if it comes to that," said Laura logically.

"But I'm not afraid of you."

"That's lucky!"

Laura came over to Joyce's cubicle.

"This place is called 'the Green,'" she said, "because of the green curtains."

"It ought to be called 'the red,'" said Joyce, "because of the red blankets; you notice them much more."

A silence ensued while they both stared gloomily at the rows of little red beds.

"Where do you live?" Laura asked at last.

"Stonebridge," Joyce answered, with a pang at the thought of it.

"Where's that?"

"Sussex."

"Have you any brothers?"

"Yes, two."

"Any sisters?"

"No."

"How old are your brothers?"

"Twenty-two and nineteen."

"Oh Lord, how funny, tons older than you!"

"Yes."

"What are they called?"

"Alan and Dick."

"I've got a brother of fifteen called George and a sister of nine called Joan. My brother's at Uppingham and my sister is coming here when she's old enough."

"Is she?"

"Are your brothers married?"

"No."

"Neither of them?"

"No."

"Engaged?"

"No."

"Are they good looking?"

"Oh—I don't know; is yours?"

"Oh, he's all right. I expect you'd better go to temps. now."

"To what?"

"Temps., temperatures, in Matron's room."

"Oh, where——"

"I'll take you there."

"Thank you."

So Joyce was launched into Laykington, and found it less terrifying than she had expected. People were so surprisingly kind, and Laura took her everywhere. She was rather frightened at first by the perpetual bells, but she soon discovered that staff were lenient with new girls, even if they were late for things. She began to settle down.

* * * * *

"Are you lost?—Trying to get anywhere particular?"

The speaker was a slender fair girl with shingled hair and a fringe and large grey eyes. She was slightly taller than Joyce and seemed a good deal older. Joyce found her immensely attractive and wondered if this was one of the prefects whom she held in such awe.

"No, thank you," she said.

"I thought you looked rather lost——"

"Oh, it's all right, thank you, Laura's somewhere about."

"Laura Acton?"

"Yes."

"Oh well——" said the girl vaguely, "that's all right——" she seemed to have lost interest in the subject. She passed by and went on downstairs. Joyce was still watching her go when Laura came up, a moment later.

"Hullo, kiddy," she said, "got stranded?"

"No, thanks; who's that girl?"

"Which?"

"A fair girl—passed you on the stairs just now."

"Oh, that's Alix."

"Alix?"

"Alix Romer."

"Who is she? Is she a prefect or anything?"

"Oh no, she's an upper fifth person."

"How old is she?"

"About fifteen, I should think."

"Is she nice?"

"Oh, she's a funny sort of person—yes, I think she is rather nice; I don't see much of her, you know."

"How do you mean she's funny?"

"She's rather sort of quiet and all that, you know—I believe she's rather bright as a matter of fact."

"She's very pretty, isn't she?" said Joyce.

They had wandered along to the changing room to tidy for supper.

"Yes, I suppose she is rather——Oh, lend me that comb a sec. Dash my hair, it never will stay tidy—there's the second, come on."

They went off down to supper.

* * * * *

Joyce fell into line quite easily; she got on well with Laura and her friends, and so, by degrees, she came to be recognized as one of Laura's set. Besides Laura and Joyce the set consisted of Elizabeth Fairfield, always known as Bess, and José Ling. During her first term Joyce, according to the advice and example of her friends, did no more work than was absolutely necessary, and often cut games, when it could be done with a fair degree of safety. In prep. she did what work was absolutely necessary in as short a time as possible, and wrote notes to her friends, when it was not too risky, and read novels—novels not "signed" by the housemistress, lent by friends and kept under mattresses. When she should have been standing in the sun trying to field in the lowest and slowest game of cricket, she was, as often as not, lying in the shrubbery and reading or talking to a friend. This shrubbery was a safe and pleasant place to be in. It was very wild and honey-combed with little twisty paths, hidden from each other by the thick leaves. In some parts of it the grass grew long and very green, and there people would lie, in the summer, and read or talk and have no fear of interruption and awkward questions. No staff ever came there.

In the upper fourth there is both scope and popularity for an unruly and adventurous spirit; all Joyce's friends were in the upper fourth, and all were unruly at this stage of their careers. Joyce found that there were two alternative ways

of treating a lesson. The first was to sit quite quietly and play noughts and crosses with your next-door neighbour, but that was rather dull. The second was to rag. Ragging is a very enjoyable sport, especially when conducted by an expert, but it needs skill and brains, and there are some staff with whom it will not do, it is far too great a risk to try ragging them, and a mild game of noughts and crosses in their lessons seems quite an adventure. There are others, however, with whom it is blissfully easy. It happened that upper four B, the form in which Joyce was, had history with a Miss Drover, who came under the second heading. History lessons were a real joy, to the class at least, if not to Miss Drover. Miss Shelburn, Joyce's form-mistress, was delighted to hear from her form that they all liked history so much because Miss Drover made it so interesting. Never having been present at one of Miss Drover's lessons, she did not realize the significance of this.

At the beginning of the term even the history classes were fairly quiet; most people seemed resigned to studying noughts and crosses, and even to listening to the lesson, in a mild way. As the term went on, however, the class became increasingly lively, and noughts and crosses gave place to more exciting games. One Friday in the end of June the history class assembled as usual, but more than usually turbulent. Before the advent of Miss Drover—whom they had named "the Dove"—there was a great deal of noise and a general upsetting of everything—books, pencil boxes, chairs, and anything else that could be upset. When Miss Drover did come in everyone was so taken up with making a noise and climbing about on the desks that she was not noticed until she spoke.

"Now, sit down, everybody, quickly," she said in her curious, high-pitched voice.

"Yes, Miss Drover," came in a chorus from the class. The noise subsided a little, and people began wandering towards their places. When everyone was at last seated the lesson began.

"Now then, I think last time we were just beginning on the reign of Charles II, weren't we?"

"Oh, were we?" said Laura, "I know a song about him——" she began to sing:

"'*In good King Charles' golden d*——'"

"Laura, be quiet at once! Now you remember last time I was saying that the position in England at this period——"

"Oh, but Miss Drover," Laura broke in, "mayn't I sing you about Charles?—it's only one verse, and I think it throws a good deal of light on his character; I think it might help us to understand the position in England at this period, you know."

"Oh, yes, Miss Drover, *please* let her," José joined in; "it makes it so much more interesting if you know songs about the people, it helps you to remember and everything."

"And it wouldn't take a minute to sing it," Laura added.

"Oh, Miss Drover, she made a rhyme!" said José, giggling, "she said 'it wouldn't take a minute to sin' it.'"

"I didn't, I said 'it wouldn't take a minute to sing it.' Please, Miss Drover, mayn't I?"

"Oh, Miss Drover, *do* let her!" came from the rest of the class.

"Oh well, perhaps you will *say* it to us, Laura," said the desperate Dove.

"But it really sounds *much* better sung," said Laura, "and it wouldn't take any longer to sing than to say, and it's a contemporary tune, you see, so I think it's rather important to have it——"

She began to sing, only mildly out of tune:

" ' *In good King Charles's golden days,*
When loyalty no harm meant,
A zealous high churchman I was
And so I got preferment.
To teach my flock I never missed,
Kings were by God appointed,
And damned are those that do resist
Or touch the Lord's anointed.' "

At this point Miss Drover tried to intervene, but Laura, supported now by Joyce and several others, continued blissfully—or perhaps intentionally—deaf.

" ' *And this is law I will maintain*
Until my dying day, sir,
That whatsoever king may reign
I'll be the vicar of Bray, sir.'

" It's rather an interesting song, Miss Drover," Laura continued without a pause, " because it throws a good deal of light on the religious tendencies of the time by explaining the religious convictions and conscientious scruples of a clergyman who lived during the reigns of six or seven kings about that time."

At this point Miss Drover's repeated calls for silence took effect; Laura condescended to be quiet.

" Why can't you do as you're told—shocking behaviour —girl of your age. Oh, dear me, I did think you would have known better—it's so *rude*, you know—a girl of your age, too—and such a *silly* song—you really have *no* manners, some of you girls; you know it *is* so rude, that sort of thing; at your age a girl ought to be able to do as she's told, but

young people nowadays——Oh, dear me, José, what are you doing?"

A shrill scream from José had ended this lecture on etiquette. She now leapt to her feet and sprang with great agility onto her chair and thence to her desk on which she stood precariously perched and making it wobble as much as possible. The cause of this disturbance proved to be a small beetle which was crawling towards her chair.

"Oh, Miss Drover, what shall I do?" José wailed, "There is a huge black animal running after me and I am so frightened!"

The others now showed their appreciation of the entertainment by laughing uproariously. Their laughter stimulated José to fresh efforts. She was loud in her lamentations and appeared frightened and distressed to what Miss Drover termed a "most uncalled-for" extent.

When the whole of the rest of the class had thrown the beetle out of the window, and assured her that it was "a sweet little thing," José allowed herself to be helped down to the ground, and the class gradually became quiet again.

When everyone was at last back in her own seat the lesson began again.

"We were talking about Charles II; can anyone tell me his dates?"

There was an awkward pause; it became obvious that no one could.

"Barbara?"

"Oh—er—1647."

"Joyce?"

"1648."

"Laura?"

"1066."

"That is not funny, Laura, it is very silly. Charles II

reigned from 1660 to 1685. I will write that up on the board and then perhaps you will remember it. I wish you girls could learn your dates properly—oh, there's no chalk, now isn't that annoying? Joan, will you fetch me some chalk, please?"

The chalk was fetched and she began to write up the dates on the blackboard.

"You've written it wrong, Miss Drover, please," said somebody from the back of the room; "you said it was 1665 to 1680, when you said what it was."

"Oh, yes, how stupid of me," said Miss Drover, turning back to the blackboard—"No, I didn't, Judith, I said 1660 to 1685."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Miss Drover, you see I thought you said 1665 to 1680, and I didn't think I ought to let you write it up wrong, you see, because then we should all learn it wrong. I was only trying to be helpful, Miss Drover, really I was."

"Yes, yes, Judith. I'm sure you were. Well now, will you all open your books at page 273?"

At this point, however, another diversion was caused by Barbara Andrews, a fair-haired girl in the back row, exclaiming in a horrified tone that her desk was getting covered with "beastly little black things," and demanding to be allowed to shut the window.

"Oh, please, let her shut it," said José, "I know that beetle will come back if it's left open."

"Very well, Barbara, you may shut the window."

This raised an indignant chorus of "Oh, but it's so hot, we shan't be able to work. We shall all be suffocated!"

"And that would make such a scandal in the papers," Joyce suggested.

"Yes, it would." Laura took her up. "It would give

the school an awfully bad name, Miss Drover, in fact, I think it would be letting down the school if we suffocated ourselves."

"Don't be silly, Laura, there is no danger of your being suffocated."

"Oh, are you *sure*, Miss Drover? because it would really sound awfully bad, you know, 'Horrible Tragedy at Laykington Seminary for Young Ladies—Fifteen Girls and a Mistress barbarously asphyxiated in a Class Room'—'Modern Black Hole of Calcutta'!"

"Fifteen girls on a dead mistress's chest," murmured Joyce.

"What does asphyxiated mean, please?" asked Bess.

"Be quiet, girls. Now you have found in your books——"

"Oh, but *please*, Miss Drover, *mayn't* I tell her what asphyxiated means?" Laura pleaded. "It would be so awful if someone were to find out that there was a Laykington girl who didn't know the meaning of such a common English word."

After some further discussion permission was unwisely given and Laura launched into a lengthy description of the process of asphyxiation.

After this they did a little intermittent work until the bell rang for the end of the lesson.

"Preparation for next time, please," said Miss Drover; "read pages 275 to 279 as far as the word 'laws.'" After this she gladly left them and sought out an older and less obstreperous class. No one even troubled to take down the prep., as no one had the slightest intention of doing it.

"Lord, what a fool that woman is!" said Laura.

II

IT was early in July that Joyce got into her first big row.

It was a hot Friday afternoon and Bess had gladly seized an opportunity of playing tennis, but the other three had cut games and were sitting in their favourite retreat, the shrubbery.

"Oh, Lord, I am hot!" said Joyce.

Their conversation that afternoon had, so far, consisted almost entirely of variations on this theme.

"I know," Laura sighed, "one is."

"I wish we could bathe," said José; "I don't see why we shouldn't."

"Come on, then," said Laura, "I will if you will."

But the others hung back—it would be such a very risky venture. There was a rule that no one could go down to the beach without a prefect or mistress, a rule that no one could bathe except when the boat was out, a rule that no one could bathe without a mistress on shore to watch them, and a rule that no one must leave the school grounds without leaving a slip in her house-mistress's room. All these rules would have to be broken—but then it was *such* a hot afternoon, and a bathe would be so perfect on such a day—they only hung back for a moment.

Ten minutes later they were running across the fields on their way to the sea. They did not go by the field path to the ordinary school bathing-place for fear of encountering a member of the staff; for the same reason they avoided

Laykington village. The way by which they went was longer, but safer. They left the school by a back way, followed a little lane for some way until they were safely past Laykington village, then branched off across the fields towards the sea. They crossed the main road from Laykington to Lichley and made their way across more fields to where a little path made a rather precarious descent into the bay next to the one used by the school. They followed the path down the face of the low cliff and arrived safely on the beach. Once there, it was no time before their clothes were lying on a rock, and they, attired in navy blue bathing dresses and red rubber caps, were wading into the sea, with cries of horror at its coldness. Once they were in, however, they remarked to each other how lovely and warm it was, and began to swim, feeling gloriously fresh and vigorous. They kept pretty near the shore all the time, as Laura was the only one of them who swam at all well, but all three enjoyed that bathe immensely. It made it all the sweeter to think of the people at school trying to play cricket in that heat.

They had been bathing about half an hour when Laykington church clock played half the familiar tune—half-past three—tea in an hour and they must be back and changed in good time, and it would take about half an hour to get back that roundabout way. Laura reckoned it all out, then she shouted to the others:

"Hi, face-ache, it's half-past, we'd better go."

"Oh rot!" José shouted back. "We've got loads of time!"

"No, we haven't," said Laura; "it'll take us half an hour to get back and then we've got to change."

"Oh, well——"

They swam reluctantly back to the shore, dried, dressed, and prepared to go. Then came the question of their

bathing dresses. When they were dry it had been easy enough to hide them, but now——

"We'll have to tie them round under our tunics like we did before," said Laura.

"We can't," José expostulated, "they're simply soaking!"

"Well, we've got to hide them somehow," Joyce remarked wisely.

They considered the point in silence, then Laura said:

"It can't be helped if we do get wet; anyway, it won't show. Come on," and they came.

As they hurried back along the lane they were congratulating themselves on having carried out such a bold escapade so successfully.

"I'm jolly glad we went, aren't you?" said Joyce.

"Good Lord, yes—even if we'd got caught it would have been worth it—it *was* heavenly!"

"The sea was so marvellous," said José; "oh, *why* don't the hags let us bathe more often!"

"Yes, it *is* rotten having so few bathes; we only get three a week now, counting Saturday. Poor old Bess, rotten luck her missing this. Oh, it was heavenly!"

They turned a corner and almost ran into Miss Ramsey, one of the staff from school.

"Hullo," she said; "what are you doing?"

"We were sent for a walk because we weren't wanted for games," Laura answered, with great presence of mind.

Miss Ramsey looked hard at them.

"Do you always get your hair as wet as that when you go out for a walk?" she asked.

"No," Laura answered, "but we got so hot and sticky and we went and washed our faces in a stream, and we got our hair a bit wet 'cause we put our faces right down into the water."

"You are a pack of rag-a-muffins! Joyce, you've got a great bit of something hanging down! What's all this?"

Before Joyce could tuck it away she had caught hold of it and felt its wetness.

"Take it off!" she commanded.

Even Laura could think of no way out now. Joyce produced a soaking bathing-dress.

"Have you others got bathing-dresses too?" Miss Ramsey asked.

Laura and José produced them.

"You silly kids," she said, "you'll probably get awful rheumatism or something now!—Well, I'm awfully sorry about this, but, of course, I'll have to report you."

She turned and went off down the lane and they watched her out of sight.

Laura was the first to speak:

"Oh damn the woman," she said.

"She was rather decent about it," said Joyce; "I don't think she wants to report us a bit."

"It really wasn't our fault," Laura mused, talking more to herself than to the others; "we took such a lot of trouble not to be caught and how were we to know that a beastly woman would come along and notice our hair like that?—anyway, we had a simply heavenly time and I'm glad we did it, awfully glad."

Having convinced herself of this she became more cheerful.

"We'll get in a colossal row," said José dubiously.

"Oh, who cares?" said Laura violently; "if you are really going to *live* you must expect rows."

"I wish we hadn't been caught, all the same," said José, expressing the thought which each of them had in mind.

* * * * *

That evening Joyce did very little prep. She sat listening

to the footsteps that passed the door. Every time anyone came in she held her breath and watched while the person spoke to Lina Manson, the prefect in charge, and did not breathe again until she was safely in her seat. She sat scribbling feverishly on a bit of paper—skulls, demons, girls, dogs, and horses, and then all sorts of funny faces—her thoughts wandered on brokenly—more horses—splendid things, horses; she ought to be able to draw them because she loved them so, but somehow they always looked a bit wrong—of course, Miss Ramsey must have reported them by now; there was no chance of her letting them off—it must be wonderful to be able to draw horses as some people could; if only you could get them to stand for their portraits —she wished she needn't keep thinking about this wretched row that was going to come, but there it was all the time, a kind of dull ache at the back of her mind. She set herself firmly to think about horses. Some of her drawings had rather nice faces. She would give them names; she wrote the names under the drawings—David, Misty, Rocket, Samson, Sunflower, Pat. Somebody had come in. Joyce did not look up, but her pencil was still and every muscle in her seemed to become taut, waiting—Lina was speaking: "Are Laura Acton, José Ling, and Joyce Aylmer here? Miss Western wants you."

It had come. Joyce saw Laura and José get up, and got up herself, and wished that she did not feel so sick. She followed the others to the door. Laura turned back, grinning, with "Pray for us!" to the prep. room in general.

Joyce thought "She'll bluff as long as ever she can—I know her!"

"Shut up, Laura, and hurry," said Lina.

Then they were out in the passage and Joyce had shut the door.

"Now we're in for it!" said Laura. Joyce did not speak, she still felt sick.

They went through the dining-room, all bare and deserted, with its rows of tables, and on down some stairs, carpeted stairs, these, to keep the noise of the school from the private rooms of Miss Western. Down the stairs they went, like sheep to the slaughter, thought Joyce, into the hall and across to the study door, where they paused a moment to pull themselves together. Then Laura knocked and they all filed in; Joyce shut the door behind them, then she turned to look at Miss Western. The look she received in return was far from encouraging, and she hastily transferred her attention to the piece of garden outside the window —Miss Western's own garden. Miss Western began to speak. She spoke for a long time, in fact she seemed quite worked up. She said that they had disgraced the house, pulling down its standard and breaking its traditions. José looked at the carpet and Laura looked at the writing-table, and Joyce looked out of the window and pretended not to listen. A man came into the garden and began to cut the grass, and Miss Western told José to shut the window. The noise of the mowing machine died down to a faint buzz— and still Miss Western was talking. This was unpleasant, certainly, but hardly as bad as Joyce had feared. From what Miss Western said, Joyce, while pretending not to listen, received the impression that she thought they had started on a career of crime which would lead them, through reformatories and gaols, to the gallows and probably to hell. That was rather funny; she wanted to laugh, but did not dare to and suppressed it. The day was still very hot and great squares of yellow sunshine lay across the floor. The buzz of the mowing machine had stopped; the man was emptying the grass-box into a wheelbarrow. Presently he

went back to the machine and the buzzing began again. Still Joyce wanted to giggle and still Miss Western talked. Then, suddenly, she dealt the crowning blow. She had felt obliged to refer the matter to the headmistress; the headmistress would see them directly after supper.

Then they were out in the hall again and Joyce was giggling, nervously, stupidly, so greatly relieved that it was over.

"Shut up, you fool!" said Laura, but Joyce could not shut up. Then she remembered that this was only the lesser ordeal passed; there was that interview to-night—suddenly she was sober again and they were talking it over.

Supper that evening was a miserable failure, as a meal. None of the three ate anything—except what the prefects forced them to. Laura, apart from this, showed nothing. She told her table a certain amount about the "jaw" they had had, and showed some skill in imitating Miss Western's voice, but she talked no more than was usual for her. José, silent and miserable, watched her with envy from another table. Joyce had the good luck to be at the same table with Bess and she talked loudly and excitedly from one end of supper to the other. Bess was sympathetic, angry, amused, disgusted, indignant, all at exactly the right moment and in exactly the right way. It relieved Joyce immensely to be able to recount her troubles to a sympathetic friend, and in all Laykington there was no one kinder than Bess.

After supper they all four walked over to Miss Whitburn's house together, and Bess promised, when they left her on the doorstep, to "hold thumbs" for them. They went in.

Miss Whitburn, the head-mistress of Laykington, was tall and rather prepossessing in appearance. She had two brown plaits wound round her head, and a pleasant, serious face. She was not the sort of person girls run to tell their troubles to, much less the character-discussing type; yet when they

did go to her they would find themselves growing strangely frank. They would have been amazed to find how much she knew about them; there was no one there that she did not know something about, not even Joyce who was new that term.

Joyce had not seen Miss Whitburn close to since her first day, and now she wondered deeply what sort of woman this was, and what they were in for. She did not keep them long. She asked them a few questions, which Laura answered—entirely truthfully. Then she came to the point.

"You see," she said, "these rules are so important. Girls might go, as you went, to bathe by themselves, being less sensible or less lucky than you, and they might have a very bad time—they might even be drowned. Think what that would mean to us; think, if one of you had been drowned, what it would have meant to the others and to the girl's people. You must try to think of that sort of thing and to realize how selfish it is to take these risks, not that you are likely to meet with accidents, but that, if you should, it would be such a very terrible thing for all concerned.

"From the official point of view, what you have done is to break a number of important rules. To begin with, it is lazy and stupid to cut games, but that is comparatively unimportant. Whenever you are tempted to break a rule you should think first why that rule was made. Some, of course, have been made simply because stupid people abused their privileges, but most of them have some very sound reason behind them. Perhaps, once you have found that reason, you will realize the importance of not breaking that rule, for other people's sake, if not for your own. After all, there are so many things that you are allowed to do and enjoy doing; we try to have as few rules as possible, but some are necessary, to serve as ready-made common sense for stupid people.

"That is all I want to say to you. You will go to early bed every day next week, and have no bathes or privileges."

They stood a moment, uncertain what do to.

"That is all," she repeated; "thank you."

They went.

III

IT is a curious fact that however long a term may seem when looked at from the beginning, it never fails to come to an end sooner or later; indeed, sometimes the end comes with a rush long before you expect it, and you wake up one morning to realize that the long-looked-for end will be upon you before you can do half the things you meant to.

It was in this way that the end of Joyce's first term came upon her. She had been thinking of it, longing for it, for ages—for although she was happy at Laykington, she was not so happy as to be free from a periodical pang of home-sickness—and then suddenly one day she found the end was close upon her. After this, however, it was rather slow in coming; nothing on earth drags like the last few days of term. The exams. are over, no one dreams of working, and no one has anything to do. The last four or five days may be like this, but for intense boredom combined with wild excitement the last day of all is unequalled.

Joyce woke up earlier than usual on the last day; so did the rest of the dormitory. On an ordinary morning it took Lina and Joan—the two prefects in charge—nearly ten minutes' hard labour to rouse them at seven o'clock. To-day they were all wide awake and talking loudly by half-past six, and breakfast was not till nine.

At first they were content with merely talking, but talking soon ceases to be sufficient amusement for twelve little girls who are all nearly mad with excitement. Very

soon they began getting into each other's beds. Bess, from the next cubicle, demanded to be taken into bed with Joyce, who readily made room for her. Two in one bed, and that a very narrow one, proved rather uncomfortable, but the fact only struck them as funny. They laughed uproariously, rolling about and kicking each other. Perpetually Joan Cobham, from the next cubicle, had to shout "shut up" or "not so much noise, Joyce, please." This caused a momentary lull, but when one accidentally kicked the other, the humour of it could not be borne in silence. It was not long before Laura joined them. As it was not possible to squeeze three into the narrow bed, Laura sat on top of them and played "ride a cock horse" on their knees.

Somehow the two hours before it was time to get up dragged by. They even contrived to be nearly late for breakfast, arriving panting in the dining-room, unbrushed and unbuttoned, just before the door was shut.

After breakfast came the long, long morning. The first thing to be done was, of course, to pack. This is a serious business and must be approached in a scientific way. First you take the tray of your trunk downstairs, load it with a few things, such as shoes, hats, tennis racquets, books, work-bags, music-cases, and coats, and prevail on someone with a nice disposition to help you carry it up. It might be imagined that when, after your fifth journey, you have brought all your possessions to rest upon your bed, you have finished the most arduous part of the job. But the worst comes at the end.

The red blankets in "the Green" were completely obscured by vast heaps of débris. Joyce looked ruefully at her own particular jumble. "What a jolly picture it would make," she said to Bess. "'Still life' you know!"

Everyone knows that when packing a trunk the heavy

things must be put at the bottom, "but then," thought Joyce, "I haven't anything heavy, at least, not really heavy." She decided to start with her games' tunics and blouses. From those she went on to school tunics, interspersed with books, a paint box, a work-bag, some stockings, and a clothes brush. After that she realized that her shoes, which should have gone in the bottom, were still unpacked. The business then became rather haphazard and unmethodical, but in the end she got her trunk shut with the help of Laura and Bess, who knelt one on each end of the lid, and only had to open it twice afterwards to put in things she had forgotten.

At last, however, even packing was over, and the next job, that of tying up books in brown paper, was quicker than packing, in spite of a way the books had of falling out of the end of the parcel.

As there were no lessons on the last day there was no break, and consequently no biscuits and milk in the middle of the morning. This was a terrible privation to most people, and, at about twelve, Joyce and José became so hungry that they went down to the buttery and begged Miss Durham, the house-keeper, for food. Fortunately for them Miss Durham was a good-natured woman, so that instead of telling them they were not allowed in the buttery she gave them two pieces of toast and half a roll left over from staff breakfast. It was not much, but it helped to pass the time and they were very glad of it. After that it was nearly time to start thinking about getting ready for dinner.

On the afternoon of the last day there was always a ghastly business known as "end-of-term-jaw." The whole school was packed into the hall in such a way that no one could move without disturbing everyone else. Interminable

lists of names were then read out in connexion with such things as aural training grading, and subscriptions that either had or had not been paid to the school mission. These were followed by a speech made by the head-mistress on some uninteresting subject such as the standard of work during the term. The whole thing lasted for about two hours, and Joyce's head drooped lower and lower as the afternoon advanced. From time to time she was roused by a poke in the back from the prefect in charge of the row behind, but she was almost asleep when the speaking ceased at last, and she opened her eyes to realize, thankfully, that it was over and the staff were going out.

After that came tea, and after tea Joyce and her "set," Laura, Bess, and José, went out and walked round and round the playing fields and up and down the drive. José was lying in wait for one of the staff whom she was "keen on," hoping to get a chance of saying good-bye. But she had no luck. The lady came out once and started walking across the field, but before José could reach her she was joined by some other "staves." For some time they walked near by, waiting and trying not to look "obvious," but it was no good. After some minutes the mistresses all went back to the staff wing together, leaving poor José most dissatisfied with life in general. She insisted on the whole party walking up and down outside the staff wing for the rest of the evening, in result of which the others were not as sorry as they should have been when the supper bell rang and the quest had to be given up as hopeless.

At last it was bed-time, and now boredom vanished and excitement was supreme as they talked of "this time to-morrow." Then, as she went to bed, Joyce felt again that queer, sick feeling which always came over her in moments of great excitement and nervous strain. She was going

home!—she was thinking now of all to which she was going back, of her people and the garden and the house, Collo and Misty, and all that fairyland called "home."

Now she was in bed and lying there she listened to the footsteps passing outside the door The prefects came up to bed; Joan came along to her cubicle next to Joyce's, and Joyce could hear Lina going to hers at the other end of the dormitory. After that came silence, except for a faint rustling from Joan's cubicle, and then more footsteps coming along. These footsteps came along towards Joyce, and, as they passed, she caught sight of Alix through a gap in the curtains. Alix went into Joan's cubicle and a whispered conversation ensued. "Funny of her," Joyce thought, "when she isn't a prefect—but she's such a funny sort of person." Gradually Joyce's thoughts drifted away from Alix to "to-morrow" again. But again, then, she found herself thinking, "why does it always sound like your own name when people whisper? It's such a hissy noise. It always sounds as if they were saying 'Joyssss—Joyssss'—that, just now, sounded just like 'Joyce.'

The faint grating noise of curtain rings interrupted her thoughts.

"Joyce—are you asleep?"

She opened her eyes with a start.

"What?" she said, very loud.

Alix was standing just outside holding her curtain back.

"Oh," said Joyce. "No, rather not—er—do come in!"

Alix came in and sat on the bed.

"I mustn't stop," she said; "I just thought I'd look in on you."

Joyce was immensely surprised, having always admired Alix from the first moment she saw her, but having only twice spoken to her; she did not quite know what to say and

remained silent, though feeling that she must speak or Alix would go again.

"How's life?" said Alix. "Had a good term?"

"Yes, thank you, topping."

"Splendid; I hope you'll always feel like that."

"Yes," Joyce answered, again at a loss for something to say, "so do I," and when she had said it she thought how silly it sounded.

Alix said "I expect you do," and they both laughed. Then Alix got up; "Good night," said Joyce, as she was going; she paused a moment and Joyce gazed up at her. She was wearing a grey-blue silk kimono with little blue and white flowers on it. Joyce thought how sweet she looked and wondered, vaguely, why she hadn't packed it.

Alix walked across the little cubicle; then, "Good night," she said, and vanished behind the curtain. Against the darkness Joyce still saw her face, and the grave smile with which she had said "Good night." Joyce was left wondering.

* * * * *

At last the morning came. Everyone was out of bed in a flash when the bell rang at half-past five, nobody was sleepy, in fact everybody wanted a bath. A tremendous noise raged round the bathrooms from then till breakfast time. Breakfast was a queer, hilarious meal, everybody much too excited to eat and longing for it to be over.

Afterwards came a mad rushing up to the dormitory, a seizing of hats and coats, suit-cases and tennis racquets, and a mad rush down again.

Back they came and passed through the dining-room on their way to the front door. The dining-room looked strangely deserted, the tables still set with dirty cups and

plates and some bits of bread lying on the floor. At one table a coffee cup had been upset. The coffee had stained the cloth brown, and the cup, lying on one side with a few dregs in the bottom, enhanced the deserted air of the place. It all gave a most reassuring feeling that they had really done with school—for the present, anyway. They shook hands with Miss Western and the under house-mistress and went out to the chars-à-bancs which were to take them to the station. "After the station," thought Joyce, "comes the train, and after the train comes London and Dick to meet me!"

IV

JOYCE on Misty cantered over the downs; the speed and glory of it thrilled her so that she let the horse go, and Misty broke into a gallop. Over the springy turf they flew. "It's heaven," Joyce thought; "what is there better than this in the world? And heaven is all that's best only more so, so it must be like this." And then again and over and over again, as they rushed on, she thought, "it's heaven—heaven."

Before her she saw where the track narrowed to a little path between great bushes of gorse; she slowed down, then stopped, waiting for Dick.

"Can't you hold her, kid?" he said coming up. "I thought she must be bolting, only you didn't seem to be getting windy!"

"Of *course* I can hold her!" Joyce answered indignantly; "how absurd you are to go thinking that." After a slight pause she condescended to explain. "If you hadn't been on a horse for three months I bet you'd give her her head for a bit.—I was rather afraid I might not be able to stop her though, once she got going!"

They walked along between the gorse bushes, and cantered again on the other side, on and on with a thundering of hooves and the wind in their faces.

As they came down the hill at last Joyce said, "I'd like to stay up here for ever and gallop and gallop as hard as I could!"

"I pity the horse," said Dick.

"Well, that's just why I don't do it, you owl; otherwise I'd go on for ever."

"My dear kid, you'd never stick to anything for more than half an hour."

"I *would*; I do, often."

"No, you don't," Dick was laughing.

"Oh, shut up!"

"Now then, don't be bad tempered or we shall send you back to school again."

Joyce was silent. She was thinking of the wild gallop on the top. "Dick doesn't understand. Perhaps heaven is different for different people—or perhaps it only seems like that to me, because of having been three months at school.'

* * * * *

The August sun blazed down on the brilliant garden, and Joyce lay on her back on the lawn, soaking it up, glorying in it all. Her book was open beside her, but she could not read just now. She felt she wanted to live her own life while she was home, to make the most of it and not go wandering off into books. "I can read books at school," she told herself, "but I can't lie on the grass and love the garden; I can't see the boys and Mummie and Daddy; I can't ride on the downs on my darling Misty; I can't do anything worth doing, I can't *live*." The thought of school drifted across her mind like a cloud blotting out the sun; school would come so soon again, so much too soon. But then, next term she would have her friends and everything. It would be so different from last term—so much nicer. All the same, it would be pretty awful leaving everything again. She wished she need not think of it now, it seemed so silly to worry about anything so far away; but it was no good

wishing, she couldn't help thinking about it. Often, when she was happiest, she would remember that it was only for a little; that it would pass as all good things will, even life. But then death was so far away that it did not trouble her, and school was so near, and getting nearer so quickly! The sound of the tea-bell broke in on this unpleasant train of thought, and Joyce forgot the future in the present, as everyone does when the present asserts itself.

She joined her father and mother and Dick under the beech-tree at the bottom of the lawn. The little tea-table was so crowded that there was no room for Joyce's cup, and she set it on the grass by her side. Little flecks of sunshine, falling through the tree, danced about all round her.

"I wonder what sort of time Alan's having," she said.

"Living on tomatoes and new potatoes and milk (Jersey cows, you know)—having a thoroughly good time, you bet!"

"Do they?" Joyce asked, vaguely.

"Do they what?"

"Live on tomatoes and potatoes and milk?"

"Yes, of course, don't you know that's all that will grow in the Channel Islands!"

"Oh, they don't! you are a fool—besides, milk doesn't grow."

"Yes, it does, it's cow juice; you ought to know that at your age. Are you, my dear child, unfamiliar with the common or garden cow plant?"

"Oh, go and boil your head!" Joyce answered, laughing. "You can't make me believe that, anyway."

"Don't speak so disrespectfully to your elders and betters; don't they teach you manners at school? Hope they'll cane you next term—that'll teach you!"

Next term. There it was again. She remembered her thoughts before tea, lying over there on the lawn. What a

fool she was to let it worry her. She looked back at the house, so friendly and reassuring, but so soon to be lost. There was her own window where the swallows built and the creeper crept. She looked the other way and there were the Downs, serene and unchanging, gravely smiling back at her.

"Hi, Collo! Joyce, look out! Oh, you fool, Col!"

Joyce looked. Columbus, the old dog, had upset her tea-cup. (He was called Columbus because he was always finding things; especially mud and very old bones.)

"Oh, don't hit him!" she said, "he didn't mean to; did you, boy?" Columbus agreed that he had not meant to and was pardoned.

"What makes you put your cup on the ground, dear?" Mrs. Aylmer asked. "It is so dangerous; someone is sure to upset it."

Joyce silently patted the dog.

"Let's have a game of tennis," said Dick. "You're not getting on much with that new service."

V

JOYCE, in a black felt hat and a navy serge coat, walked up Laykington drive with a suit-case in her hand.

It was getting dark now and crowds of little lights shone out from the great black mass of the school.

" It must be nearly eight," Joyce thought. " I've missed supper, of course, but that doesn't matter." She had come back as late as possible on purpose. Dick had taken her up to town and they had been to a matinée together, after which he had put her into the train and she had come alone to Laykington. She did not go in by the front door, as new girls do when taken to school by their mothers; being one of the initiated, she went in by the changing-room door.

Once inside, everything was quite different in a moment, not only Joyce's surroundings, but also her state of mind and her feelings about school. In an instant she was back again in the whirl and rush of it all. Except for a general air of disturbance and the over-powering smell of floor-polish, everything seemed to be exactly as it was the term before.

People shouted " Hullo, Joyce," followed by the usual beginning of term questions—" Had decent hols.? " " Where are you sleeping? " and so on; after which came " Have you heard this? " and " Have you heard that? "

Then, suddenly, there was José, over the other side of the room—how funny it was to see all these people again!

" Joe!—hullo, my dear." José turned and rushed across to her.

" Hullo, Joy—had good hols.? "

" Topping, thanks. Have you? "

" Rather."

" Where are you sleeping? "

" Room I, with Laura and Ba and Kitty."

" Oh, what a shame Bess and I aren't with you instead of those two—it would be such fun! Do you know where I'm sleeping? "

" I expect you're in 'the Green' again. Bess is."

" Oh, good. I hope I'm with Bess. I must go and see."

She rushed off along those passages down which she had followed Laura five months ago and burst into " the Green." Bess was there, talking to a little group of people, but she left them when Joyce appeared and came over to her.

" Hullo, how splendid to see you again. Had decent hols.? "

" Prime, thanks; have you? "

" Yes, thanks, topping. Laura and Joe are together in Room I; I do wish we were with them, don't you? It seems such a waste us not being, when it is a four room."

" Yes, isn't it rotten? Still, I'm glad we're together, anyway—I am up here, aren't I? "

" Yes, you're along that end, about three from the end."

They talked for some time and then Bess came over and watched Joyce unpack her suit-case.

" Choc? " Joyce offered.

" Thanks awfully."

" When do they have to be finished? "

" Don't know—by the week-end, isn't it, generally? "

For a time they discussed sleeping arrangements, probable forms and new prefects. Then Joyce had to go off again, to Miss Western, to " temps." in Matron's room, and, at

length, to bed. She was glad enough to go to bed when the time came, as she was tired after such an eventful day, and felt, also, that it would be a relief to get out of the rush for a bit. But it was terrible to be alone with her thoughts, she discovered; she could not help comparing everything with home. This great bare dormitory, so unlike her own dear bedroom; this narrow, hard little bed and bare white dressing-table. It was all such a contrast to the home that she had left behind her, the home that she would not see again for three months. She thought how, at home, everything would be going on as usual. Dick would have got back some time ago; they would have finished dinner by now; they'd be sitting in the drawing room, reading, perhaps; amusing themselves somehow, anyway, not moping because she had gone! But she had gone, and she was trapped now, in this horrible place, and couldn't get away for three whole months. . . .

She remembered, regretfully, how she had let the dread of the future spoil the happiness of the end of the holidays. It was such a frightful waste, because after all school was as inevitable as death, and worrying could not mend matters. She had known it then and saw it even more clearly now—"Sufficient to the day."

She got into the hard cold bed, thinking how cheap the sheets felt. "I am a prisoner," she whispered, suddenly, "and I can't get away." She felt her throat getting sore and buried her face in the pillow. Then she heard a curious noise, somebody was whispering quite near her.

"Joy, are you asleep? There didn't seem to be any 'pres' about, so I thought I would just come across and say good night."

"Oh, Bess, how sweet of you; have you got a decent bed?"

"Rotten mattress; I think the bed's all right."

" Aren't they beastly after home? "

" Oh, awful! Is your's very bad? "

" *Simply foul!* " Joyce answered emphatically.

" I say, you'll be coming out all black and blue to-morrow, then! "

Joyce laughed, " Oh, well, I'm sorry I'm being so awful, only——"

" Yes, I know, but you mustn't think about it, you'll be all right to-morrow."

" Oh, yes. I'm so glad you came; it makes it so much better if you know that someone else minds too."

" Oh, well, everybody's feeling pretty rotten to-night, so cheer up! Audrey Lambert's guarding, so I'd better go, she's such a sharp hag!—Good night."

" Good night."

Joyce went to sleep happy.

Next morning she was waked in the way that was so familiar last term, though forgotten through the holidays.

" Dorothy."

" M'm."

" Alison."

" M'm."

" Elizabeth."

" M'm."

And so on, until it came to Joyce, and Joyce, remembering the ways of last term, grunted with closed lips in the way that is easiest for a person who has just been waked.

Soon afterwards came breakfast and the tremendous noise and clatter in the large bare dining-room.

After breakfast there was chapel. The first chapel of the term and the hymn which never failed to mark the occasion:

"*Rank by rank again we stand,*
From the four winds gathered hither;
Loud the hallowed walls demand,
Whence we come, and how, and whither."

On the first day of term no work was done. In the morning there was plenty to do unpacking and getting things straight, and in the afternoon there was a "beginning-of-term-jaw" and a call over of the whole school. The list of new forms was then read out. Joyce and her friends had all been promoted to the lower fifth, José was in A, the other three in B; Laura, who had a good brain, could probably have been in A too, if she had really worked, but as she much preferred to play, she remained in B, and José, greatly to her disgust, found herself separated from her friends. She was, of course, glad to be in such a good form, but she could not help feeling the price to be almost too high.

On Thursday, the second day of term, work began in earnest along with all the usual routine of school.

Joyce now began to learn lacrosse. So far she had only been at school during a cricket term and had cut games as often as it seemed safe to do so, but lacrosse was a very different matter. For the first week of term there were no games, and all the good people gave up their time to coaching the beginners in their own houses. During the first few days Joyce felt rather lost; she never seemed able to catch the balls or to return them properly and her prospects as a lacrosse player seemed rather doubtful. On the fourth day, however, she was lucky enough to be coached by Joan Leicester, the captain of the house. Joyce was, at first, rather nervous of being coached by such an important and distant being, but she very soon discovered that with Joan's help she got on quite fast, and earned several words of praise which were unimaginably precious.

After the first week, when the new people were left rather more to their own resources, Laura helped Joyce in every spare moment she had. Laura herself was in the second "excel" twelve and so was able to help Joyce considerably. Every morning they raced to get their beds made so that they could get out and have a short practice before school. Every morning when the chapel bell went they raced in again, hot and breathless, and just managed to get into chapel in time. The result of these exertions was that Joyce passed in "catching and throwing" in the fourth week of the term, and was put into the fifth excel twelve, on which occasion Joan Leicester actually condescended to congratulate her.

On the whole Joyce did not like the autumn term nearly as much as the summer. She missed the bathing and tennis, and sitting out on the field in the evenings; but, on the other hand, she greatly preferred lacrosse to cricket, and that was a point in favour of the autumn.

From the point of view of work there was not very much difference. In the lower fifth Joyce had to work rather harder than in the upper fourth, but only a little harder, and it was only a little more difficult to avoid working. Joyce found to her disappointment that she now had no lessons with Miss Drover, but on the other hand she had English with Miss Archer, and though Miss Archer was the very antithesis of Miss Drover, Joyce was glad, as she liked her. Miss Archer was one of the younger mistresses and, though sometimes sarcastic, was recognized as a good sort and a person not to be trifled with. Joyce found she had to do all her English preps., but she also found that English in lower fifth B was really quite interesting.

One of the chief features of the autumn term was the dance that was held at half-term when all the Old Girls came

down for the week-end. It happened every year and was looked forward to with great excitement. Often, on Saturday night, they had little dances, but the Old Girls' dance was nothing like them; it was a *real* dance, with refreshments, and people were allowed to wear what they liked on that great occasion.

The dance was held on half-term Saturday, and began immediately after supper, continuing, with an interval for refreshments, until ten o'clock. For weeks Joyce and her friends, and, indeed, the whole school, had been looking forward to it. They had been making up their programme (a most important business which began about the second week of term) and even counting the days with the aid of elaborate calendars, as though it had been the holidays instead of only a dance.

The excitement became intense on Friday evening when the Old Girls began to arrive. As there were not enough bedrooms to accommodate them all some of them slept in the classrooms, three of which were fitted out as dormitories with little camp beds packed like sardines in neat rows. The Old Girls did not have meals in the house dining-rooms, but were fed sumptuously in the gym., a long room with doors of which the upper part was most conveniently made of glass. Through this glass envious eyes could watch the Old Girls' meals being set out and marvel at the wonderful food they were given.

On Friday evening, just before supper, Laura and Joyce made their way to the gym. door and peeped in. The supper was being laid and seemed to be nearly ready. There were long tables decked out in a way quite foreign to the nature of school—such a meal as Joyce had never thought possible at Laykington.

At last the Old Girls began coming in to supper, and Laura

and Joyce had to tear themselves away for fear of being seen. On the way back they met Bess.

"Well?" she questioned; "what sort of spread have the Old Girls got? I suppose you have been gloating over it."

"It's too heavenly for anything," Joyce answered; "I only wish they fed us half as well—stingy old brutes!"

"They're only stingy to us," Laura interposed; "you wait till you're an Old Girl—oh, my hat, they do have a feed!"

"What are they having?"

"Oh, all sorts of things; chicken and ham and tongue and salmon mayonnaise, and some sort of pies, and millions of vegetables, and perfectly divine puddings!"

It is to be feared that the Old Girls did not rhapsodize over their fare quite so enthusiastically, but to Joyce, at least, it seemed a dinner fit for a king.

On Saturday afternoon an excited little party gathered in the green dormitory to consider the important question of clothes. As people were allowed to wear what they liked for the dance their dresses must, of course, be overhauled and re-overhauled many times before the great day. The Old Girls' clothes were also under consideration, and such remarks as

"Did you ever see anything so frightful as Ivy Hutchinson's hat?" or "Who would have thought that Joan Rogers would have dressed so badly?" were to be heard almost all the time.

Joyce and Bess were busy surveying, considering, and comparing their dresses.

"I must go up to Room I to see what the others are going to wear," said Joyce.

"Oh, yes," Bess answered, "and do ask them which frock I'd better wear; I simply can't make up my mind. *Do* you think the stain on the yellow one would show *very* much?"

Joyce had already given her opinion half a dozen times on this knotty point, but she did not hesitate to do so again.

"Oh, no, it will look quite all right; after all, it will be artificial light and everything." But Bess was still unconvinced.

"Well, anyway, do ask the others what they think," she said.

Joyce ran off to Room I, and having thoroughly discussed her own frock and those of Bess, Laura, and José, she came leaping downstairs again with a bottle of stuff which José had recommended for the removal of the tiresome stain.

She had started her mad career down the second flight of stairs when she missed a step, slipped and fell, finally arriving, dazed and bumped, on the landing at the bottom of the flight. She was very soon roused by a pain in her left ankle, and noticed that she had fallen with it twisted under her. She moaned softly to herself, but made no effort to move until two girls, coming along from the dormitory, found her sitting helplessly at the bottom of the stairs, still grasping the unbroken bottle of stain-remover. Having found what was the matter, they helped her up and half carried her to the Matron's room. There she subsided into a chair, and the Matron, after examining the ankle, declared it to be only twisted.

"What a pity it happened just to-day, too," she said; "missing the dance and everything, it will be a pity. Still, it's not very bad; I don't think you need go to the san., you can go into Room V, there is nobody there now, while Leslie is away."

Joyce seemed frozen with horror; she had heard the words "missing the dance and everything," and after that no more.

"Oh, but I *can't* miss the dance!" she exclaimed; "I simply *can't!* Couldn't I just go and watch? I couldn't dance, of course, but couldn't I go?"

The inevitable answer came:

"I think you had better keep quite quiet for a day or two. The doctor will be coming up to the san. to-morrow and I will just get him to come and have a look at that ankle."

"Oh, but really, it doesn't hurt a bit!" Joyce pleaded; "*please* mayn't I go if I'm ever so careful. I could keep it up and everything, and I could come back early you know; can't I just go for a little? *Surely* that wouldn't hurt it, please——" She went on for what seemed ages, and it all sounded all right, but Matron was adamant. At last Joyce became so discouraged that she stopped her entreaties.

Room V was a single room, not a bad little place as single rooms go. Joyce was installed in the bed with several books, but she was terribly bored and unhappy, and her ankle hurt a good deal.

Just before supper, Laura and Bess came to see her. They were dressed for the dance, Bess wearing the yellow after all.

"Poor old Joy," they said; "what rotten luck. Is your ankle very bad?"

"No, thanks, not very."

"Look," said Bess triumphantly. "I tried some of José's stuff on that stain and it was frightfully good. It hardly shows at all now, does it?"

"I can't see it from here. You got the stuff all right then, did you?"

"Oh yes, thanks, Colly brought it to me."

"How d'you like my frock on?" Laura asked.

"Oh, it's awfully sweet."

"Good. Glad you like it. You are a cheese to go and muck your ankle just to-day; does it hurt much?"

"A bit."

"Rotten luck. Glad you haven't gone to the san., anyway."

"I wish they hadn't shoved me in here. I hate single rooms, and I'm so bored."

"Yes, it's rotten; they might have let you come and watch the dance."

"My dear, I begged and begged Matron to let me, and the beastly old hag would say nothing but 'You'd better keep quite quiet, dear,' or something equally fatuous."

"Good Lord, why ever shouldn't you come? Come on, Bess, we shall be late for supper."

Joyce listened to them running down the stairs, with a feeling that there was nothing left to live for.

Later she heard a sound like distant thunder and knew it for the scraping of many chairs as everyone sat down to supper. They all had it together to-night, Old Girls and present girls and staff—everyone but her. She tried vainly to read, but could not concentrate her attention for more than five minutes together. Supper was brought her by one of the maids, an extra nice supper, just as the others were having; but it was very little comfort to have a nice supper if you had to eat it all by yourself and if you were missing the dance and if your ankle was hurting you.

Again a sound of thunder, and then a flood of other sounds as they all poured out of the dining-room and along the passages, on their way to the hall. Joyce sat and listened to the sound of their happy voices and laughter, alone and disappointed.

Matron came in and settled her for the night and went away again.

"Try to get to sleep soon," she said, as she put out the light.

"Try to get to sleep," indeed! Who could sleep while fragments of music came floating over from the hall, so attractive, so tantalizing?

Joyce wished Bess or Laura or José would come up to see her. After all, they needn't stay long and they knew how bored she was and how miserable. Probably most people didn't even know she wasn't there, and when she didn't turn up for a dance her partner would simply think she had cut her, curse her, and think no more about it.

It was quite dark and Joyce could see some little stars out of the window. She began counting them, one, two, three, four, five—somebody was coming along the corridor. The footsteps reached her door and stopped. Then someone knocked.

"Come in," said Joyce, startled. Could it be Bess or Laura after all? The door opened and a voice said:

"Joyce?—are you there?" "Good heavens," thought Joyce, "I do believe it's Alix of all people!" Aloud she said:

"Is that Alix? I say, how topping of you to come—I was so bored."

"How's the foot?" Alix asked.

"Oh, it's—Oh, well, it's nothing awful."

"But hurting a good bit?"

"Yes—do sit."

"I *am* sorry you're missing the dance."

"Yes, so am I—but still." There was a slight pause, and then Joyce said:

"It was awfully decent of you to come; how did you know about me?"

"I heard from Laura."

"But the others didn't come; even the ones that had dances with me. José hasn't been to see me at all—the others did come before supper."

"Did you mind her not coming?" (Alix did ask queer things!)

"I was rather lonely, you know; I wanted somebody to come."

" How have you liked this term? " Alix asked after a pause.

" It's not been bad at all; quite fun sometimes. I love 'crosse."

" Good. Are you going to develop into a games fiend? "

" No, I'm not nearly good enough. Anyway, games aren't everything."

" No, but some people think they are—I'm sorry for the people, I think they get *narrow*, if you know what I mean."

" But they are some good, don't you think?—team spirit you know, and all that."

" Oh, of course. But too much of it may make you lose your individuality."

" How do you mean? "

" Oh, you know how people get to imitate each other at school; they all tend to get alike in time, if they aren't strong-minded enough to be themselves, that is."

" But if they're all nice, why shouldn't they? "

" It's rather dull, don't you think? and, anyway, they're not all particularly nice."

" Don't you like the people here? " Joyce asked.

" Oh, they're not at all a bad lot on the whole, but I think a good many are awfully silly."

" Do you think my friends are silly? "

" Not particularly, only they seem to me to be wrapped up in school too much, not realizing that school is only a few years of your life, an incident. I don't really know about José; she's different; but the other two—but they're all nice people, so what does it matter? as long as you aren't bored. Excuse my talking like this about your friends. You asked me what I thought, and now you know."

" But why should I be bored? " Joyce asked.

" I don't know, really, why you should—only you're different too."

"Thank you," said Joyce.

After that they were silent for some time. Joyce could see Alix vaguely outlined against the window, small neat head and slight figure, black against the grey background.

"Listen," Joyce said at last; "they're still dancing; aren't you longing to go?"

"No," Alix answered. "Not unless you would rather I did."

"Oh, no, rather not—only it seems so mean to keep you."

Again they were silent for a time. Then Alix said:

"How long are you going to stay at school, Joyce?"

"I don't know; a long time yet, I expect. Sometimes I long to leave, but I'm sure I shall hate it when the time comes."

"Often I long to," Alix said; "school gets so boring; I long for 'the wider life and larger opportunities' as they say in end-of-term prayers. I want to be independent and do something, instead of just mucking about at school. It's such an impossible situation to be—well, to be looked on as a child."

"How old are you?"

"Fifteen and a half."

"You seem such tons older than me; I thought you must be older than that."

"Well, of course, a year or two makes much more difference at school than it does at home, and I suppose I am old for my age, too."

"And being in a higher form and everything," Joyce suggested. "You're in the removes, aren't you? Does it feel awfully grand?"

"Not grand, no, but it's more interesting the higher up you get. As soon as you get to a form where people work because they want to instead of always being driven it's much more interesting, of course. Quite a lot of people in the removes are really interested."

"Do you mean to say you *like* work?" Joyce asked in amazement.

"I didn't exactly mean to say that, but I am interested in some of it."

Joyce looked at her for a moment as though seeing her in a new light.

"I think," she said tentatively, "that you're too sort of serious to get the best out of school."

"Perhaps I am," said Alix.

"You know," Joyce said, "I think I'm rather old for my age, too."

"What family have you got?"

"Mother, father, and two brothers."

"How old brothers?"

"Twenty-two and nineteen."

"That ought to make you old."

"What family have you got?"

"Only my father."

Joyce was silent, wondering if she had been very tactless.

"I never knew my mother," Alix added; "I had a brother, too, but I hardly remember him. He was a lot older than me and he was drowned when I was only seven." She spoke almost in a whisper. Joyce did not know what to say and so was silent. In this tense silence they heard the people coming back from the dance. Alix got up.

"I must go now," she said. "Good night, Joyce."

"Good night," said Joyce. "Thank you so much for coming. It was sweet of you."

"Extraordinary creature!" she thought; "marvellous creature—what made her tell me all that? What makes her so nice to me—every now and then?"

Joyce had happy dreams in Room V

VI

THE end of the autumn term is always most glorious, Christmas is coming, and the spirit of it penetrates to the very heart of the school, until everybody is made aware of an unusually exciting and friendly feeling in the very air.

On the last Sunday of the autumn term there is great rejoicing, the chapel is all decorated with holly and evergreens, and there, in the evening, the carol service is held. This, of course, was Joyce's first autumn term, and none of it was lost on her, least of all the carol service. Dear old carols, bringing her memories of every Christmas that she could remember, right back to when she was only five and her grandfather gave her "Garry," the enormous teddy bear which was still at home somewhere.

First came the eternal "Wenceslas" followed by "The First Noël," and so they went on, dear, well-remembered carols that they used to sing at home, jolly, ringing, triumphant, but, above all, happy.

Joyce sang most eagerly, and on every side of her the others sang too—

> "*Hail, thou ever blessèd morn,*
> *Hail, redemption's happy dawn,*
> *Sing through all Jerusalem*
> *Christ is born in Bethlehem!*"

Everyone loved the carol service, and they all sang their

hardest, the happiness of the carols making them happy, and their happiness seeking expression in their voices.

The choir sang "In dulci jubilo," another carol followed, sung by the whole school, then the choir again, singing the song of the angels, "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." Again the whole school sang, every word seeming to stress the happiness of the time—

> "*Ay and therefore be merry,*
> *Set sorrow aside;*
> *Christ Jesus, our Saviour,*
> *Was born on this tide.*"

The carol ended and was followed by a solo. From where Joyce was sitting she could not see Alix in the choir, but she recognized her voice as it rose in the plaintive strains of "Tryste Noël." One carol, at last, with nothing of happiness in it, only a plaintive longing.

> "*The ox hath opened wide the door*
> *And from the snow he calls her in,*
> *And he hath seen her smile therefore,*
> *Our Lady without sin.*
> *Now soon from sleep a star shall leap,*
> *And soon arrive both King and hind,*
> *Amen, Amen.*
> *But oh, the place could I but find,*
> *The place could I but find.*"

At first Joyce was too nervous, for Alix's sake, to enjoy it much, being terrified every moment that she would make a mistake, but Alix gathered force and Joyce confidence, as she went on. This sorrowful carol, among all the songs of gladness, seemed in some way like Alix herself. As Joyce listened she thought of what Alix had told her on the night

when she had left the dance to come to her. Her very illusiveness seemed like sorrow, and the carol, to Joyce, was a cry from her heart.

It was ending now. Joyce longed for it to go on for ever, but she knew that it was too beautiful and too sad to last.

> " *But would to-night my tears were there*
> *Between her bosom and his hair.*"

The song of sorrow died away, and then, with hardly a pause, they were singing a song of joy, all together,

> " *O come, all ye faithful,*
> *Joyful and triumphant*——"

Then that was over too, and Joyce was making her way out of chapel between Bess and Laura, but she could not speak to them now. Alix's voice still rang in her ears——

> " *But would to-night my tears were there*
> *Between her bosom and his hair.*"

She must speak to her. For what seemed ages she waited in the piercing cold of the winter's night. All the others went in, and still she stood and shivered in the shadow of the chapel. She looked at the myriad stars, and all the time the " Tryste Noël " was singing itself in her head. Then Alix came out of the vestry surrounded by a crowd of choir people, talking hard, all together. " Why can't they leave her alone? " thought Joyce; " they so obviously don't understand." She stood close against the chapel wall and watched them walk away and pass through the big doors of the school. Still Joyce stood, freezingly cold, in a kind of reverie. Then she pulled herself together and began to go towards the door, and suddenly Alix came back again. But now that she had her opportunity Joyce did not know what to say and so she

said nothing. Alix did not see her and went quickly on into the vestry. Joyce followed slowly as far as the vestry door, telling herself what a fool she was and trying to think what she ought to have said and what she would say if she had another opportunity. Although she waited there some minutes she had not thought of a suitable remark when Alix reappeared. But she was determined not to miss another chance and came boldly forward out of the shadow.

"That *was* wonderful, Alix," she said; "I *did* love it."

Alix started and looked round.

"You mean—everything?" she said.

"No," said Joyce, "I meant you."

"Me?" she repeated, gazing absently in front of her; "didn't you think the rest was wonderful?—I did."

"Yes, I did; it all was—only you were much the best."

Alix did not answer and they walked to the door of the school in silence.

* * * * *

During the next day, the last day of term, Joyce did not speak to Alix at all, but she saw her quite often, and every time she noticed her intently. She looked at her as she had never before looked at anyone, noticing her every movement or look or word, and twisting it about in her mind more often than not, until it seemed to have some bearing on herself. That day, also, Joyce noticed a still more curious thing about herself. She had always been rather shy of Alix, always had a slight feeling of inferiority when confronted by her; but to-day she was quite definitely frightened of her. This fear did not, however, keep her away from Alix; on the contrary, she constantly found herself wandering about the house with no apparent object, and knew herself to be looking for her. She wandered from one untidy room

to another, meeting everywhere the same disconsolate look in walls and furniture, as of something that has been thrown away. It was the last day look, as Joyce well knew. All these heaps of oddments lying about meant that people were packing and had thrown out the accumulated rubbish of the term. It had congregated, mostly, in some part of each room where a waste-paper basket might be supposed to have been. It all meant that they were going home; the heaps of rubbish, the empty cupboards standing with wide-flung doors, the smell of dust and trunks and leather straps—but Joyce did not want to go home. It was amazing, but it was true. She did not want to go. Going home meant leaving Alix, and she felt she would rather not go home at all than leave her just now.

From time to time, in her wanderings, Joyce did meet Alix, quite unexpectedly, but she never dared to speak, she just looked at her and passed on. And so, at last, with much time wasted in fruitless wandering, Monday passed and the long-looked-for Tuesday came. And now, as they were going to part so soon, and for what seemed so long, Joyce felt that the only thing to be done was to get hold of Alix somehow and say good-bye to her; it was the only consolation left. This, however, was easier said than done, and she found that she had not the slightest opportunity of even getting near Alix until they were actually waiting at the station.

Down at the station Joyce watched and waited for her opportunity. The 8.5 went, and cleared off a good many people, and still she hung about watching Alix, changing her suit-case from hand to hand, and constantly dropping her 'crosse.

Then the 8.19 came in, the London train, and all the London bound people filed through the barrier on to the

platform, Alix among the first, followed later by Joyce, violently pushing to get near her. Alix was just getting into the train when Joyce reached her.

"Good-bye," she said. Alix took no notice. "Good-bye, Alix." Alix looked round that time and actually came out on the platform again.

"Good-bye, Joyce," she said. "Happy Christmas and holidays and so on!" She put out her hand which was instantly grasped by Joyce.

"The same to you," she said, and thought how silly and inadequate it sounded, but it was all she could think of to say. Alix looked as if she was going to say something more, but one of the others called to her from the carriage and she smiled at Joyce and went back into the train and Joyce went on and joined her own friends.

At Liverpool Street, where Joyce was met by Alan, she caught just a glimpse of Alix leaving the station with a tall dark man.

"Surely," she thought, "that *can't* be her father; he looks so young, and she said her brother was dead." It puzzled her off and on, for nearly three years, to think who it could have been.

* * * * *

When Joyce came back to school again, after Christmas, still thirsting for the sight of Alix, she found herself, in a way, disappointed. Alix was there, as charming as ever, but she took no notice of Joyce. Joyce had hoped that the few words that had passed between them after the carol service might have made some difference to Alix's treatment of her, since, to herself, they had meant so much. But it appeared she was wrong. They hardly exchanged a dozen words during the whole course of the term. During that term

nothing happened of great importance to Joyce, or, indeed, to Alix either. In fact, the thing, perhaps, that made the most impression on Joyce was a very small incident.

One day it happened that she and Alix were both in the changing-room, cleaning shoes, along with some other people, when a girl came in with a great bunch of primroses.

Alix was the first to notice them and she threw down her shoes and went over to the girl at once, exclaiming:

"Oh, lovely! Let me smell them, Kitty." She buried her face in them for a minute, and went back to her shoe-cleaning without another word.

Joyce, being herself a lover of flowers, felt that this incident showed another link between Alix and herself. It seemed so suitable, she thought, that Alix should love primroses, because she was, in a way, more like a primrose than anything else. The likeness seemed somehow significant to Joyce, though significant of what she could not say.

Afterwards, when she was home and was out alone in a wood of primroses, she remembered Alix and picked a great bunch for her. She longed then to have her there, to bring her to Stonebridge and make her happy, as she felt sure she could; but without knowing her better she could hardly dare to invite her.

Joyce sent her primroses to London, to Alix, and received, in answer, a most charming letter from Alix herself, the first she ever had from her, and for a very long time the only one.

VII

JOYCE and Laura were walking round the playing fields one afternoon in the summer when something about the clock tower caught Joyce's fancy and she turned to Laura.

"What's it like inside the clock tower?" she asked. "I mean, has it an inside? It can't be solid, can it?"

"Oh, no," Laura said. "I went up there once, a long time ago when I was in the Lower School. I don't really remember it much, but Alison Reed and I went up. We didn't get far though; we started going up long twisty stairs and then we heard somebody coming and we came down, and then of course we got caught. We *did* get in a row too, I remember so well. We were sent to the San. for two days in single rooms, and I was so bored. I spent most of the time writing on the wall with a pin—Oh, and one of the days I had treacle for tea, and I wrote my initials in treacle all over the top of the chest of drawers—sister *was* so wild, too!"

They both laughed at this reminiscence, then Joyce reverted to the original topic.

"Was it nice in the clock tower?" she said. "I should love to go up."

"Well," Laura answered. "Let's go; I'll take you. We shouldn't get caught now because we'd go at a more sensible time and everything. Alison and I went just after we were supposed to be in bed, and so of course we got caught."

The next stage in the proceedings was to confer with

Bess and José; and this they did at the earliest opportunity. Bess was delighted. She has never been up the clock tower and was always ready for an adventure.

"We'd better go in the night," she said, "because there's nobody about then."

After some discussion they decided that Bess was right.

"To-night, then," said Laura; and so they settled it.

They made the most elaborate arrangements. They were to keep themselves awake until about twelve o'clock and then get up. Joyce and Laura and Bess all slept together, but José slept in another room with two other girls which complicated matters considerably. In the end, however, they settled everything satisfactorily and went to bed in great excitement.

For a long time they waited, talking in whispers. About ten came second rounds. They heard the doors opening and shutting along the corridor, and then their own door opened and Miss Western's head appeared round it, also her hand carrying a candle. They tried to look very sound asleep, and she shut the door and went on. At last they heard her go downstairs, but they waited for a long time after that, listening to the incessant ticking of Laura's clock. At eleven they could wait no longer and got cautiously out of bed. Laura crept along to the door of José's room and gave three very soft taps, the signal agreed upon for José's to get up. After that they dressed as quietly as possible. Once Joyce banged into a chair with a noise which sounded deafening in that night silence. They all stood still and held their breath for a full minute afterwards, but there was no answering noise from any part of the house, and at last they ventured to go on Then, with the greatest care, they opened the door and crept softly along the passage. They waited for José at the top of the stairs, and after a minute

or two she joined them there and they started creeping down. Every second board seemed to creak, Joyce thought, and once she trod on a nail with her stockinged foot, but not very hard, fortunately.

After much creaking and pausing and creaking again, they reached the little door which led to the clock tower stairs. This they opened, with some difficulty, and having crept through they shut it again behind them, and there, as Laura remarked, they were. Inside the door it was quite dark except where a small window showed grey in the blackness. For a moment the darkness gave them rather a helpless feeling and Bess whispered:

"What happens now?" But they soon began to get used to it, and after a little they could even see each other as darker shapes in the general darkness. Laura struck a match which showed them to be at the foot of a spiral staircase. Once before Joyce had seen this door standing open a little and, peering inside, had seen the wooden steps curving round out of sight, as she saw them now. The match went out and they began going up, feeling their way at every step, the stairs seemed very rickety and creaked and groaned continually, even under their carefully directed stockinged feet. Laura went first and behind her Joyce, followed by Bess and José. Joyce, as they went up, felt a little creepy and was glad that she was in the middle of the expedition, so that she had no unprotected side. Presently Laura stopped and lit another match, then she took a candle stump out of her pocket and lighted it. She had reached the top of the stairs and was looking round her.

"I didn't know you'd got a candle," Joyce whispered, "why didn't you light it before?"

"I was afraid of somebody seeing the light through that window on the stairs. I say, there's a sort of room up here!"

Joyce put her head up through the trap door at the top of the stairs and looked round. There was a draught and the candle flickered so that it was difficult to see. In spite of this she made out a small room with a roughly boarded floor. Laura went up into this room, followed by Joyce and the others. Once up they made a more careful survey of the place. It was very small and very dirty with three brick walls and one wooden one. In the wooden wall was a narrow door from behind which came a curious regular sound. They paused spellbound to listen. It sounded loud and deliberate, a kind of heavy click, click. Then suddenly Laura opened the door and held the candle up so that the light fell straight through it. The noise became much louder and, for a moment, they all gazed in silence, then they all laughed. Through the open door they could see a series of cog wheels and metal bars—it was the clock.

"It's only the clock!" Bess exclaimed. "It sounded so weird in the silence—I was almost frightened."

"I don't think there was any 'almost' about it if you ask me," said Laura; "I should say you were jolly frightened."

"Well, what about you?" Bess asked her.

"Oh, I was the only one who remembered the clock at all," said Laura, "but just for a second I couldn't think what it was."

"Well, there doesn't seem to be much to see now we are here," said Joyce, "though certainly that was exciting."

They looked round the dusty little room again and Joyce put her hand on an iron ladder which was fixed against the wall in one corner.

"What's this?" she asked.

"A ladder," Bess suggested.

"Funny!" said Joyce sarcastically, "where does it lead to, Laura?"

"I don't know."

Joyce went up the ladder. There was a thick coating of rust and dust on every rung as well as on the sides. It was a very dirty business. In the roof above the ladder was a small trap door which was bolted, the bolt, also, was very rusty, but she managed to draw it back. As she pushed at the trap she experienced a delightfully shuddery feeling at the thought of what might be behind it. It was very stiff, but it gave suddenly and she put her head up through the hole. A cold wind ruffled her hair and she saw the stars above her. Round the trap door was a small piece of flat roof with a curb at its edge. She climbed out onto it and looked round her. She was standing on the very top of the clock tower, around and below her were the weather-worn roofs of the school, in front was a sheer drop to the gravel path and the playing fields. It all looked very strange and far away, and for a moment Joyce stood silently looking down, then she turned back to the trap door from which Laura was just emerging.

"It's priceless up there," Joyce told the others as she climbed down the ladder. "You come out on top of the tower and there's a little flat bit and it's *frightfully* high up."

The others went up in turn, and when Bess, who went last, was coming down the clock suddenly struck. The noise was frightful.

"Shut up, you brute!" said Laura, but the brute went on and on. It struck twelve times.

"Let's go away," said José, "there are probably ghosts or something up here at midnight."

"Don't be silly," Laura answered scornfully; "of course there aren't."

But José was already half-way down the stairs and the others lost no time in following her.

Joyce was glad to get safely into bed again that night, cold and sleepy and tired. "But it really was rather exciting," she thought, and went to sleep.

VIII

ONE Saturday afternoon in June, Joyce was loitering on the gravel in front of the big door, all by herself. It was not often that she was alone, but somehow to-day all her friends seemed to have deserted her. Bess had gone out with her people, and Laura was playing in an away match of the under-fifteen eleven to which she had suddenly and miraculously ascended. Her cricket had come on a lot this term and she had really become keen; she practised at the nets incessantly—sometimes she even forced the unwilling Joyce to bowl to her—and this was the result: she had actually been put into the first "excel" team and played matches! Joyce, who hated cricket as much as ever, was quite unable to account for it. Her own experience of cricket so far had chiefly consisted in standing on the playing field on a hot afternoon, as far from the pitch as possible so as to avoid hard balls, chewing grasses and thinking of other things—standing till her feet were tired and she was hot and sleepy—and doing nothing.

Anyway, this sudden promotion of Laura's was one of the causes of Joyce's loneliness to-day, which made her think it rather a pity that Laura had become so keen.

Another cause was the fact that José had lately taken to going about a good deal with Kitty and Barbara, the two girls with whom she slept, and had rather neglected her own set. This afternoon José had gone off somewhere with her new friends, and though she had, it is true, invited Joyce to

go with them she had done so in such a half-hearted way that Joyce had refused.

Now, wandering alone, Joyce felt most annoyed with her friends for their desertion of her. "Of course," she thought, "I can't blame Bess; it's not her fault that her people have come, and they don't come often. Anyway, I don't grudge her a good time and good tea and everything, specially if she brings back sweets. I suppose I can't blame Laura either, though I wish she wasn't so mad-keen about cricket (it's such a rotten game anyway)—but José! she really is horrid to go off and leave me like this. I suppose she doesn't care about us any more now. I know what it would have been like if I'd gone with them; they'd have been talking all the time about things I don't know about, all their silly secrets—José's sure to know them all; and they'd be wishing I wasn't there all the time and laughing at me behind my back. I do think José might have stayed with me; I specially asked her to go to the wood with me, and she said she was so awfully sorry, she'd promised to go with them! 'Awfully sorry,' indeed! Jolly glad I should say.—Anyway, I don't care. They can go where they like, as far as I'm concerned; I shouldn't care if they never came back. If they don't want to go with me they needn't."

So Joyce thought bitterly, exaggerating her wrongs because she was lonely and annoyed at being left alone—she, who had always had plenty of friends, to be left with no one to go with!

Then, as she wandered across the gravel trying not to look lonely but feeling it all the same, she saw Alix come out of the door with a book in her hand. "She is alone too," thought Joyce; "if only I could go with her, I shouldn't mind anything——" and she turned her course a little more away from Alix in the fear that she might read her thoughts.

"Oh, Joyce!" Alix was calling her!

Joyce turned and looked questioning.

"Are you doing anything?"

"No."

"I'm just going off to one of my haunts," said Alix, with her eyes on the middle distance, "to read and be lazy. Perhaps"—she hesitated—"would you care to join me?" Her face was grave and calm, betraying nothing, but from her voice Joyce gathered that she really wanted her to go. Joyce was no less delighted than surprised.

"I should *love* to," she answered; "are you sure you want me?—I mean——"

"You bring a book too," suggested Alix. "I'll wait for you here."

So Joyce ran in and seized a book and rushed back to the gravel. Alix was standing there waiting for her, her grey eyes gazing out at the playing fields and the woods and fields beyond, her fair hair shining like gold in the sunlight. She turned as Joyce came up to her.

"Are you sure you've nothing else you'd rather do?" she asked, almost shyly. "I mean, don't for heaven's sake come unless you want to."

"Oh, I *do* want to," Joyce answered reassuringly.

They left the school grounds, crossed several fields and made their way into a narrow grassy lane between high hedges. They followed this for a little way, then Alix led the way through a narrow gap in the side farthest from school, and Joyce, following, found herself at the top of a large field. They were in one corner of the field, shut in on two sides by high hedges in the mature green of summer, with here and there a great bush of wild roses. On the other two sides the field sloped down and the view lay open to them. They settled themselves in the long grass in the

corner with their backs against a great oak tree. The field was pasture land, and down at the other end some cows were grazing, but they had left the grass long near the hedge and it was full of sorrel and tall buttercups.

"Have you been here before?" Alix asked.

"No, never."

"It's a nice place, isn't it?"

"It's perfectly lovely."

"I love that great wide view," said Alix, "it gives such a feeling of space." Then they began to read.

Alix seemed absorbed in her book, her eyes never wandered; but Joyce could not feel any interest in *The King's Secret* this afternoon. Even when the hero, severely wounded after disabling five men, found himself covered by the pistol of that foreign nobleman with greasy hair and eyes too near together, even then Joyce's attention was not riveted, though she had, from the first, suspected the foreigner. When the nobleman, with a crafty smile curling his cruel lips, offered the hero life in exchange for honour, Joyce could not give him her attention. Her eyes kept wandering to Alix's face, as though drawn by magnetism, but Alix's eyes remained fixed on her thin green book. Joyce turned to her book again, but she gazed at it with unseeing eyes and turned a deaf ear to the hero's declaration that "Honour is the crown of life." She did not care much now whether he died or not, because she was sitting by Alix and they were alone together. Joyce gazed out across that wide expanse of country and listened to the birds, except for them everything was very silent and she started when the silence was broken by Alix's voice:

"Do you like this?

'Happy, happy time when the white star hovers
Low over dim fields fresh with bloomy dew,

Near the face of dawn that draws athwart the darkness
Threading it with colour like yew berries the yew,
Thicker crowd the shades as the grave east deepens,
Glowing, and with crimson a long cloud swells,
Maiden still the morn is; and strange she is and secret;
Strange her eyes, her cheeks are cold as cold sea-shells.' ? "

"Yes," Joyce answered, "I do—*awfully.*"

"M'm," said Alix, "I'm glad," as though speaking to herself.

"Is that all of it?" Joyce asked presently.

"No—not nearly all. It's very long."

"I wish you would read it—please," said Joyce, a little shyly, a little tentatively.

"There are only a few verses here," Alix answered, "but some day I will read it all to you."

Joyce was thrilled—"Some day"—Then she meant Joyce to go with her more times than just this once.

"Oh, I should love it if you would," she answered; "I love it—only I don't understand it a bit, you know."

"No," Alix said. "You don't at first. Only the rhythm. But it's worth reading several times until you get the sense, too."

"Are there many nice things in that book?" Joyce questioned hopefully.

"Yes," Alix answered; "I think it's a very good collection."

"I wish you'd read me some more."

Alix turned and gazed at her, "You're sure," she said, "that you really mean that?"

"Really," Joyce answered, "quite sure."

Alix read her more and more. Joyce liked them all; she loved the sound of Alix's voice and the rhythmical music of

the poetry; she leant against the tree and listened in a sort of dream. Every now and then one struck her more than the others, but she made no comment nor even asked for one again because she was afraid to break the spell, afraid, also, to hear her own voice. So she sat and listened and Alix read on and on, picking out one here and one there as though she were reading to herself with no thought of Joyce. She read her own favourites to Joyce, without comment or any note of praise; only perhaps in reading a favourite her voice was a little more expressive, ardent, even. Joyce was overcome with the dreaminess of this lovely voice carrying the lovely words on and on, like a great river, carrying little boats on and on to the sea, and when the voice paused and then began again she saw another little golden boat high up the stream, and then one struck her strangely as being marvellously appropriate, so that she was roused from her trance, rigid with the surprise of it. It seemed to give words to her thoughts.

" *Hers were those clear grey eyes*
You watch, and the story seems
Told by their beautifulness
Tranquil as dreams.

" *She'd sit with her two slim hands*
Clasped round her bended knees;
While we on our elbows lolled,
And stared at ease.

" *Her voice and her narrow chin,*
Her grave small lovely head,
Seemed half the meaning
Of the words she said.

* * * * * *

" And her beauty far away
Would fade, as her voice ran on,
Till hazel and Summer sun:
And all were gone:

" All fordone and forgot,
And like clouds in the height of the sky,
Our hearts stood still in the hush
Of an age gone by."

Still Alix went on and still Joyce sat leaning against the tree in the June sunshine and drank in her words, listened and listened, and was happy. She looked at Alix sitting there beside her, at her grey eyes fixed so steadily on the book, at her lips moving to form these sounds that thronged round her, and her hair that was golden where the sunshine caught it, and as she looked the voice ceased. When it went on again it was completely changed as the words were, and Alix smiled as the charm was broken.

" It's nearly half-past four," she said; " shall we go back? "

" No," said Joyce. After a moment she pulled herself together and added, " I don't want to eat, if that's what you mean."

" It is what I mean," Alix answered, " only I didn't put it so crudely! "

They laughed and Joyce said:

" Of course, if you're hungry—I mean, don't let me starve you, will you? "

" Oh, it's hardly a question of starvation; I very often don't have tea, it's a stupid meal at best."

There was a silence, broken by Alix again.

" You sat very quiet all that time," she said; " did you really enjoy it? "

"Yes, really."

"I'm glad you liked it," said Alix thoughtfully; "I did so hope you would."

Joyce turned and stared at her, but Alix turned away and gazed out over the fields to where a ridge of hills rose far away.

Then Joyce said:

"Will you read me some more some time?"

"I will."

"When?"

"Any time we can get away. It's best to be here, I think."

"I know it wouldn't be——" she paused, searching for a word—"wouldn't be—the same, anywhere else."

"We can't go on and on with these little snippets," said Alix thoughtfully, "but I will read you some longer things, 'Love in the Valley,' there are such lots of lovely things!" She became expansive. "I'll read you Masefield and Rupert Brooke and lots and lots of things. Do you know what sort of poetry you like?"

"No, I suppose not. I haven't read much. What I liked chiefly was things with a lot of *go* to them, you know, a sort of swing."

"I know," said Alix; "Kipling—Newbolt, I think that's what most people read at school."

"Yes, I think I liked Kipling."

"M'm, 'If you can keep your head while all about you——'. Well, he has written some splendid things, but everyone's work is so mixed—look at Rupert Brooke!"

She seemed to be talking more to herself than to Joyce otherwise her conversation would have been rather wasted as Joyce understood less than half of it.

"Things sound so different when you read them," said

Joyce. "I used to get bored with it, reading to myself; it all seemed sort of dull, except when it had a terrific swing."

For a long time they talked, sitting together under the great oak-tree. They read no more that evening, but talked and talked, mostly with their eyes fixed on the horizon. It was a bell that roused them finally, which is the way with all good things at school; all peaceful, happy times end with the sudden clamour of a bell that brings you back to all the little worries and difficulties of life. Alix and Joyce were roused by the chapel bell. There was no time to be lost now, they would be late unless they hurried, and so they did hurry. They ran all the way back to school, and it was not till they were safely installed in chapel, in their respective rows, that Joyce had time to wonder what had happened.

As they came out from chapel Laura came up and slipped her arm through Joyce's.

"Hullo, my dear," she said; "how did you get on without Bess and me? Very miserable?"

"Splendid, thanks—such a relief to have you quietly out of the way for once!" Joyce answered. It was, in fact, true, but she knew that Laura would take it as chaff—otherwise, of course, she could not have said it.

"Had a decent time?" she added, suddenly awakened to the demands of politeness as practised at school.

"Awfully jolly," Laura answered, glad of this opportunity of recounting her adventures, "We won, 78 to 63; it was a jolly close thing."

"Was it?"

Joyce was too taken up thinking about Alix to have time to listen to Laura, but Laura went gaily on, never noticing how preoccupied she was.

"It's an awfully decent school, the building, I mean, you

know; nearly as big as this and with prime grounds and everything. The people seemed to be rather decent too, and they had one or two awfully good people in the team, but they were awfully sort of uneven, you know."

After a moment's silence Joyce, feeling that some remark was required of her, hazarded the question, "What did you make?" hoping that Laura had not already told her.

"Oh, I only made 3. I was caught at cover almost directly I went in. Phil made top score, she made 27, and Mall made 17 not out; no one else made anything much. Poor old Jean sprained her wrist or something funny, trying for a catch. It was a terrifically hard ball and she had to run for it, and I don't know what she did, only she seemed to sort of fall over somehow, and suddenly everybody started crowding round her and she was hauled off to the pav., poor kid. It was rotten luck; it was before tea, too."

"Who did you say did that?" Joyce roused herself to ask.

"Jean."

"Oh, poor thing—how did it happen?"

"Oh, Joyce, I've just been telling you about it! Are you deaf or something?"

"Oh, I see," said Joyce hastily, "that was Jean you were telling me about—I thought that was different."

"Well, it wasn't," Laura answered; "it was the same." But she let the matter of Joyce's deafness drop and they went into the house together.

In bed that night it occurred to Joyce that somehow her feelings towards Laura and her set had changed; not that she didn't like them any more, only somehow now they seemed a little dull, a little narrow-minded, in a way. Their interests were so limited; none of them cared a straw about poetry, but that was the sort of thing grown-up people cared

about more than preps. and marks and cricket and all the things that count for so much at school. Alix was so different, so much more interesting; the others were nice, but she was so much more than that—and she had treated Joyce as an equal and a friend.

IX

OFTEN in the long summer evenings Alix and Joyce would slip away to the corner where the oak-tree stood at the top of the sloping field, and Alix used to read aloud, or sometimes, though not often, they just talked. From these talks Joyce gathered a little more about Alix's home life than she had known before. Her father was a painter, and a good one, apparently, as people seemed to buy his pictures whenever he wanted to sell them. But he got fond of his pictures sometimes, Alix said, and would not sell them. Also, for long stretches he would not paint at all, and at such times they often became very poor. Alix horrified Joyce once on recounting some incident of her childhood by saying, quite calmly,

"We were very poor then; we used to live chiefly on porridge, and I used to get so hungry!"

"Did you live on porridge for a long time?" Joyce asked in an awe-struck tone.

"Oh no," Alix answered; "it never lasted for more than a few months. As soon as some more pictures were sold it was all right again; for a time, at least. But that was a long time ago. We have been all right now for a long time—I mean, there's always enough for what we want, now."

Joyce gathered that Alix lived in Yorkshire, if anywhere; or, more accurately, that her home was in Yorkshire, as she did not often seem to go there. Alix described it as "home"

and seemed greatly attached to it, but admitted that they did not often go there.

"We used to live there quite a lot," she said, "when my brother was alive; but afterwards my father wouldn't go there often, though he wouldn't sell it." It appeared that Alix usually spent her holidays in London with her father, though sometimes he took her abroad.

"I should like to see your father," Joyce had said once, and Alix answered,

"Yes, I expect you would; people do like him."

Joyce, though greatly interested in Alix's home life, was afraid to question her about it, and so gained only a very vague idea of how she lived. The poetry was still the chief interest; all through that summer term Alix used, from time to time, to read poetry to Joyce, and Joyce, whose newly awakened senses responded delightedly to Alix's rendering of it, was always eagerly receptive, always ready for more.

One day towards the end of the term Alix produced a narrow black book which Joyce had not seen before. They talked for a few minutes before reading anything and Joyce asked what the new book was.

"Oh—poetry of sorts," Alix answered evasively, "I'll read you some."

She read:

"*My tears are salt upon the sand,*
My voice is weeping in the air,
My spirit mourns through all the land,
Nor finds you there, nor finds you there.

"*My sighs blow cold above the hill,*
The winds that chase the clouds along,

My heart is torn with grief, and still
My sorrow burns me into song.

" *My voice is louder than the wave*
And sadder than the gulls' wild cry,
My heart is aching in the grave,
My soul goes on, and cannot die.

" *I live not, only in the wind*
My voice of sorrow cries aloud,
Looking, though I shall never find,
Looking, though only wind and cloud."

" What do you think of it? " Alix asked without looking up.

" It's terribly sad, isn't it? " Joyce answered doubtfully. " But I like it awfully all the same."

" I'm glad you like it," said Alix; and then, after a pause, " it's my own."

" How do you mean, your own? " Joyce asked.

" I wrote it," she explained. She kept her face turned from Joyce, and seemed intent on a grass which she was pulling to pieces.

" You? " said Joyce incredulously.

Alix said nothing.

" Good Lord! " said Joyce, " how *did* you do it? It's marvellous—— I didn't know you'd written it, in fact I didn't know you'd written any poetry. Read me some more—is there any more? "

" Yes, there is more," she answered, and shut the book.

" How extraordinary to think of you writing poetry; it never occurred to me before that people did, except proper poets, I mean."

Alix laughed. " Most people," she answered, " write a

little bad poetry before they grow up finally, but I suppose it's generally chiefly when they've just left school—that's when they're at their worst."

"Er——? shall I go on getting steadily worse for some time?"

"I only meant," said Alix, "in that sort of way."

"Oh," said Joyce, "why didn't you read me some of your poetry before?"

"I suppose I was afraid to."

"Afraid! What do you mean?"

"Well, you know, it isn't at all good, and it's not the sort of thing you hurl at people at first sight, if you know what I mean. Besides you might have hated it."

"Nonsense, how could I have? That's false modesty."

"Oh, no," said Alix; "when did you know me modest?"

"When did I know you at all?—does anyone know you?"

"I think, perhaps, someone;—but we don't even know ourselves; so there you are."

Joyce wasn't at all sure that she was there, so she left it at that.

After this Alix quite often read Joyce things of her own. Joyce felt the honour keenly, and was most proud of Alix's friendship, but in public they did not go together. There were Laura and her friends to be reckoned with; and there were the people Alix went with too, though she did not go very definitely with any one person, but picked up a curious miscellaneous collection of friends. Anyway, Joyce would never have dared to put herself forward as a friend of Alix's, as Alix was not only considerably older and higher in the school than herself but was also very popular in her own unobtrusive way.

Once, Laura, having noticed them together, said to Joyce:

"Why are you always rushing off with Alix? What ever do you two do together?"

"I'm not always rushing off with her," Joyce answered, on the defensive instantly; "I don't at all often go with her."

"You do!" Laura assured her. "I tell you you're *always* going with her. But I can't think why. You've got absolutely nothing in common, and I'm sure she doesn't want you always running after her. She's just the sort of weird hag who'd *like* to go off by herself."

"She's not a weird hag!" Joyce answered indignantly "She's jolly nice."

"I never said she wasn't, I like her myself, but she is a bit weird at times and you can't deny it. As for the way you go following her about—it's the first sign of insanity—not the first either—but still. Why can't you stick to us and be sensible? Aren't we good enough for you?"

"Oh, don't be a fool," said Joyce impatiently.

"Look here. If you want to drop us, do. That's all."

"You ass," Joyce said, "of course I don't, I think it's you that's mad now. Because I go out with Alix once or twice, instead of hanging onto you the whole time, you instantly think I'm trying to chuck you; of course I'm not, you great owl, why ever should I be?"

"You go out with her a jolly sight more than once or twice—but still." Laura was cooling down; Joyce heard that in her voice, and was glad. She mustn't break with them; anyway she was really fond of them and didn't want to. She went on; she would not leave this thing half done.

"Why ever should I want to chuck you, Laura? We've always gone together, ever since I first came; and we've always got on very well, haven't we? I dare say you get wild with me pretty often, but we don't often quarrel, do we?"

"Oh, it's all right," Laura said, rather gloomily; "I wondered what was up, that's all."

"Well, that's easily settled," said Joyce; "because nothing's up."

So peace was re-established between them, and Laura turned her attention to discussing José.

"What," she asked, "is José doing? Is she going to go with Kitty and Ba?"

"I don't know."

"I wish she'd say"; Laura was finding fault all round to-day; "I wish she'd say if she's going to go with them instead of us."

"Well, really," said Joyce, "I don't see why she should definitely chuck us just because she likes Ba and Kitty and likes to go with them sometimes. You can be friends with more than one lot of people, after all."

"You can," said Laura slowly, "but you can't be in more than one set at the same time. I wish she'd make up her mind."

"Well, she's in our set at present."

"Then why does she go with them so much?"

"Because she happens to be sleeping with them and they get on well together."

"Oh, well," said Laura at last, "I'm not objecting to anything she does; I suppose it's all right, only I wish she'd be a bit more definite."

And so the subject was closed.

José herself was feeling very much the same, on this point, as Laura. She had found herself this term in a three-room with Barbara Andrews and Kitty Southwood, and the three had got on so well together that by now she really liked them better than her own set, and they seemed to like her as much as she liked them. They were always pleased

when she went with them, and in the bedroom they used, contrary to the nature of three-rooms, to have splendid times.

This put José in a very awkward position. She did not want to break entirely with her old set, and yet she wanted, more often than not, to go with her new friends. She still sat with Laura and the others in chapel, and sometimes went for walks or watched matches with them. For the rest she went with Ba and Kitty.

José had discovered these kindred spirits entirely by accident. She had got to know them a little first by being in the same form with them, when she was moved out of the B form where Laura and Bess and Joyce were. But the cause of their real friendship had been simply and entirely their being put to sleep together. They had very soon found themselves to have interests in common. José was musical, that is to say she learnt the piano and the violin and seemed to be doing quite well; also she had quite a pretty voice, though not at all a powerful one. She rather fancied herself in the rôle of musician, and Kitty and Barbara were interested in music too—only mildly, but still, they were interested. They listened pretty patiently, and were sometimes even interested, when she told them about her latest piece and last music lesson and the new song she was learning. They liked her to sing to them too, especially when they were in bed, and she would sing, sometimes, until they were both asleep.

Laura had always been frankly bored by José's music, and the others, though they usually listened politely when she talked about it as long as she did not talk for too long, were not really interested, and of course they obviously did not understand. This was only one of the ties between José and her new friends, but it was an important one. And so in every way it seemed to José that Kitty and Barbara were

nicer and better suited to her than the others—and yet, she was fond of the other three; she always had gone with them and they had had such good times together. She often thought of that day last year when they had gone bathing together, she and Laura and Joyce, and how Miss Ramsey had caught them; and always when José thought of those days she felt she must keep in with her old set, but it was all very complicated. She preferred to go with Barbara and Kitty, and yet she could not go with them much without offending the others; and as it was they probably did not like her going so much with these new friends.

For some time José had been thinking things over, and at last she made up her mind: she could not go on like this any longer. Everything she did brought her in danger of offending one or other set of friends, and it had got to stop. She decided she would go with Barbara and Kitty properly and let the others say what they liked. Accordingly she did go with them, she sat with them in chapel and in lectures, went with them in the evenings and at the week-ends, and ceased to see anything of the others.

It was not till the week-end, however, that the final break came. It is, naturally, at the week-ends that people see most of their friends, because it is then that they have most free time. On Saturday José took the bull by the horns and spent all her free time with Barbara and Kitty. The effect was instantaneous. On Saturday evening Laura, so to speak, "called her out." They walked round the playing fields together, and engaged in a battle of words.

They walked in absolute silence for some time and then José said:

"Who won the away match?"

And Laura answered, "They did." After which they walked on in silence.

At last Laura embarked on the subject she had at heart.

"You get on very well with Ba and Kitty, don't you?" she enquired threateningly.

"Yes," said José.

"You never come with us now."

José didn't answer.

"Well, of course, you needn't if you don't want to," Laura continued; "we only thought it was rather funny your going with them such a lot all of a sudden."

Still José didn't answer.

"I do wish you'd say something!" Laura exclaimed in exasperation. "Are you going to chuck us altogether, or are you not?"

Still José was silent for some time, wondering how best to put what she had to say.

"Well, I do like Ba and Kitty awfully," she said at last; "but of course I like you too."

"Oh, well," said Laura, "of course we don't want you if you'd rather go with them, but I should like to know who you do mean to go with. I dare say we are a bit boring for anyone like you."

"Don't be silly——" José interjected; but Laura went on:

"You'd better drop us altogether if you're sick of us. We'd much rather you went off with these new friends of yours than come with us when you don't want to."

"Oh, all right," said José; "of course, if you don't want me there's no more to be said—I certainly won't force myself upon you. As it was I was wondering what to do about it."

"About what?" Laura asked, but she went on without waiting for an answer. "I never said we didn't want you; but still, of course, if you like to take it like that you can. Anyway, it's perfectly obvious that you like them better than us. I don't think much of your taste, but still——"

"Well they have got better manners than you anyway!" José answered indignantly. "They never say beastly things about you, though I don't see why they shouldn't, and they——"

"Oh, I know they're perfect, aren't they? Well, you won't want to see us any more, that's clear."

They were standing by the big door now and José said, "No, I shan't, if you're so horrid," and ran away into the house.

So after that José went no more with Joyce and Bess and Laura.

X

WHEN the spring came again Joyce was still going with Laura and Bess, and still seeing something of Alix. It was not so easy in the winter for Alix and Joyce to be alone together; they could not sit about outside and there was no privacy indoors.

Sometimes they went for walks together, and those were splendid times, but all too few. Together they picked the hazel and willow catkins, the first flowers of the year, and together they welcomed the spring on a sunny day in February when it made its first appearance.

Joyce used to tell Alix anything that came into her head during those walks. There was nothing she hid from her, in fact, there was nothing to hide, and she talked freely and happily of everything that happened to her, whether important or not. Alix talked little, but she was a good listener, and now and then she would tell Joyce a little about herself. Something amusing that had happened in a sixth form lesson, some anecdote about one of the staff, or, in another mood, some incident of her childhood or her home.

But those walks were few and far between, and they were the only time, then, that Joyce and Alix had together. Joyce wished they could have gone together properly, but there was rather a wide gap between them in age and standing, and, anyway, the necessary advances, which Joyce left of course to Alix, were not made; and then, at half-term, Alix

was made a prefect. It was a great surprise to Joyce, who had never thought of such a thing; and it was not a pleasant one. She saw at once that this would widen the gap between Alix and herself. She could not tell how much, but she was sorry for any widening of what was too wide already.

Then a dreadful thing happened. One evening Joyce was wandering in the school house with Bess and Laura; it was after supper and they, being free till bed-time, had drifted over to the school house chiefly because they were not supposed to be there. They were strolling down the passage laughing and feeling happy, when they were overtaken by Alix on her way to the library.

"What are you people doing down here?" she asked.

"We've come down to get some books," Laura answered.

"Well, hurry up and get them and go back to the house," said Alix, and she went on.

They followed her to the library where they wandered about a little and pretended to be getting books. Then they came away again, but instead of going back to the house they went up to the hall to slide. The hall was in darkness, only lighted faintly through the windows by light from the house called "Austin's." The great polished floor was most tempting. They took little runs and slid with their feet apart, emitting repressed screams. It was splendid fun. When they were tired of that they left the hall and started off along the school house passage again. They were through the school house and passing Austin's when Joyce kicked Laura accidentally and Laura returned by pinching Joyce, who let out a yell, and at that moment Alix reappeared. She was on her way back from the library with a pile of books, and she stopped and spoke to Laura.

"Why are you still here?" she asked. No one answered.

"You know you're not allowed over here after supper, except to fetch books, don't you?"

"We came to fetch books."

"But you left the library ages ago; what have you been doing?" Still no one answered.

"Who screamed just now?" Alix asked.

Joyce looked at the floor and changed feet, "I did."

"It wasn't her fault," volunteered Laura, "I pinched her."

"She must learn to control herself," said Alix coldly, "and you'll all be reported, of course. You'd better go straight back to the house or you'll get reported again." She went on towards the house and left them, two mildly annoyed, one furious and miserable.

"Oh these new prefects!" exclaimed Laura. "You can't do a thing without finding one of them waiting round the corner to pounce on you. They're such a beastly officious crowd."

"Yes," said Bess, "they think they're everybody, that's what's the matter with them. She would go and report us, the old swog."

But Joyce said nothing, only her colour was heightened and she did not seem to be listening to the others.

That night was a very miserable one for her. She lay awake thinking of Alix and again and again her words came back to her, "she must learn to control herself," till she felt that she hated Alix, and that seemed to involve hating everything.

Next morning Joyce, in her anger, made things a hundred times worse. She was really more angry with herself than with anyone else, but she naturally blamed Alix. After a rather unhappy night she was down in good time for breakfast, for once, and Miss Western, for once, was late. Joyce was annoyed at having to wait; she was also annoyed because

there had not been room for her at her own table and she had gone to the table where Bess was, and discovered, too late, that it was Alix's. As a result of all this, she was filled with a desire to annoy Alix, or at least to attract her attention. The room was in silence, she whispered loudly to Bess:

"Old Wuzzie must be washing this morning, she does every month or so."

Bess giggled, but Alix was looking in the opposite direction and gave no sound of having heard.

Joyce whispered louder, "Oh! I can smell that filthy bacon from here."

Alix turned on her, "Go out of the room, Joyce."

"Oh, please, I only said I could smell the——"

"I don't mind what you said."

"—— bacon was bad."

"*Joyce, go out of the room.*"

"But it *is*, Alix!"

"Go on," said Alix, with her eyes fixed on Joyce. Looking back, Joyce met that look and went without more ado.

It was a strange and uncomfortable mood that possessed her that morning; she felt half-injured, half devil-may-care, but wholly angry. Standing outside she heard a hush of shifting feet and squeaking chairs and knew that Miss Western had arrived, then came the great chair scraping as they all sat down and the great jabbering as some seventy tongues broke loose. After that a girl from Alix's table came to fetch Joyce in to breakfast. Joyce was very lively during breakfast; she talked nearly all the time and had all the people near her shaking with laughter. She talked so loud that Alix had to send down a message to tell her not to make so much noise.

" Shut up, from Alix " was the form in which the message reached her.

" Pass up that I won't," Joyce answered promptly. It was passed back a little way, but did not reach Alix.

Joyce saw no more of Alix that day, but she was thinking of her as she sat in prep. in the evening. She sat with her head on her hand, her face was burning hot, and her head ached. Before her on the desk was a book of French irregular verbs—" Je sais, tu sais, il sait." Joyce was not thinking of them, she was entirely taken up with being annoyed with Alix.

" Really, it's a bit thick," she was thinking, " the way she treats me, after all we've done together and everything——" Oh, well, perhaps that was a bit caddish, one couldn't have prefects favouring their friends—but still, Alix needn't, Joyce told herself, have been so horrid. Joyce had done nothing to her. At least she might have been a little rude, but that was nothing; and, anyway, it served Alix right, and she hadn't been so very rude; what, after all, had she said? She went over their conversation at breakfast. " I just said ' I can smell the bacon from here ' and she said ' Go out of the room at once, Joyce! ' " (mentally, Joyce put on an exaggeratedly ferocious tone for this, to prove to herself that Alix had flared up over nothing). " So I just told her I'd only said I could smell the bacon, because, after all, it wasn't much to say, and she said she didn't care what I said and kept shrieking at me to go out of the room, and so I went. I wasn't really rude; I just told her I'd said I could smell the bacon, that wasn't a bit rude, I had to tell her because she'd told me to shut up. And last night I only made a little squeaky noise because Laura pinched me and she started fuming and swearing." Joyce decided to go over this point again. " I only just made ever such a little noise——"

But when she reached the end of her lengthy arguments her conscience was still unappeased. Nobody had accused her of being rude to Alix. Why was she taking all this trouble to prove that she hadn't been? Why, indeed!

At last the bell went and Joyce stumbled off to get ready for supper. She felt dizzy when she got up and very miserable. She sat through the whole of supper without saying a word, and when, towards the end of the meal, some people ragged her she felt so depressed and ill that she wanted to cry. After that the evening dragged slowly by while Joyce sat with her head in her hands and tried to read. At last it was bed-time and she went slowly up to the three room she shared with Laura and Bess and sat down weakly on the bed. The others were up there already and seemed very hilarious, talking arrant nonsense and shrieking with laughter.

"You're very silent," Laura said presently, turning to Joyce. "I hope you don't disapprove of our conversation." Bess laughed.

"Don't be silly," Joyce answered morosely.

"Good Lord, listen to it!" Laura commented.

"It's in a beastly temper," said Bess; "you'd better leave it alone or you'll get your head bitten off."

"I'm not," Joyce answered in a tone that completely contradicted her words.

"Aren't you?" said Laura. "Well, you might not be so beastly gloomy then, sitting there with a face as long as a wet week and growling when you're spoken to; it's really most depressing for us."

Joyce was fuming, but had the sense not to answer. Suddenly Bess had an idea.

"I say," she said; "are you feeling rotten? You look a bit green."

"Headache," Joyce answered curtly.

"Oh, sorry," said Laura; "what rotten luck!"

But Bess went on. "Do you think you've got a temp. or anything?—I say, I'm sure you'd better go and tell Matron, Joy, really."

"Oh rot," Joyce answered ungraciously; "I shan't die."

But Bess was most urgent and Laura supported her, and Joyce herself felt so wretched that in the end she went.

Five minutes later she came back.

"I'm going to the San.," she said. "I did have a temp."

* * * * *

After two days in bed with 'flu, Joyce was beginning to feel better, though still deeply depressed. She was alone in the room, and as she lay there hour after hour, too tired to read, or tired of reading, she reviewed again and again the events of the last few days. Each review was more unsatisfactory than the one before. She was miserable about it all because she felt that Alix's being made a prefect had made an even wider gap between them than she had feared.

There was no hope now of her ever really going with Alix. Alix would forget all the happy times they had had together, and she, she would remember all right, remember till her life's end, maybe, but she couldn't remind Alix. Poor Joyce, she was very lonely in the San. all day by herself, and her health and her thoughts had combined to make her extremely depressed.

She was roused from her unpleasant reflections by the sound of the door opening and, looking up, saw sister coming in.

"Well," sister said in her usual cheery way, "and how are you this afternoon?"

This question never failed to find Joyce unprepared.

"Oh—er—all right," she murmured rather incoherently.

Then she saw that sister had sheets on her arm and instantly felt twice as much alive as before. "Oh!" she exclaimed hopefully, "is somebody coming over?"

"Yes," sister answered; "you'll be glad to have someone else, won't you? though I suppose you're hardly well enough yet to want to talk, and I don't suppose she will be either."

"Who's coming?" Joyce questioned eagerly.

"Alix Romer."

The answer was so strange and yet so natural, so unexpected and yet, almost, expected, that Joyce had no breath to speak again. She lay quite still gazing at the ceiling and tried to think coherently. "Alix Romer." She had thought so often, "Now that I'm alone here, supposing Alix were to come!"—but she had made up wild, impossible stories, and now that Alix was really coming they did not help her much. What should she do? How was she to treat Alix after that awful business? What should she say? How would Alix treat her? Would she be *very* horrid to her? Perhaps Alix would be very ill, almost at death's door, and she, Joyce, would sit up all night with her and practically save her life—no, she had to deal with stern reality now, these wild imaginings were played out—and, oh! she had almost forgotten! Of course, she didn't like Alix now. Her thoughts went round in circles like a man that is lost in a forest, vainly groping, groping—and getting back, at last, to the starting point. The starting point was that Alix was actually coming, but the hundred and eightieth degree was, as often as not, a very moving scene over a deathbed, her own or Alix's, according to circumstances. 'Flu seemed to have played havoc with Joyce's imagination, not too well under control at the best of times.

Then the door opened again and Alix came in. She went over to her bed and began undressing, apparently quite

self-possessed. Joyce's eyes followed her intently, under cover of the bed clothes.

"Hullo," said Alix. "What's the matter with you? 'Flu?"

"Yes."

Neither of them was feeling exactly talkative, and they lapsed into an absolute unbroken silence after this ill-sustained attempt at conversation.

During that evening and all the next day they hardly addressed two words to each other. Joyce was beginning to feel better, but Alix had a bad headache and slept a good deal of the day.

Once in the night Joyce woke to see her sitting up in bed, very white and strange in the moonlight. For a long time she watched her while she sat quite still. At last she moved and made an inarticulate sound.

"What?" Joyce ventured, "What's the matter, Alix?"

"Robin?" Alix suggested, tentatively.

"Robin?" Joyce repeated incredulously, "where?"

Alix made no answer. Joyce was rather nervous now.

"What should I do," she thought, "if she started walking in her sleep." But, after a little, Alix lay down again.

During the course of the next day Joyce several times nearly asked her about it, but at the last moment she always put it off, and so they did not speak to each other that day either.

It was not till the night of the next day, after the light was out, that they talked at all. It began by Alix suddenly saying:

"Good night, Joyce," in a perfectly ordinary voice.

"Good night," said Joyce, "are you feeling better now?"

"Yes, much better, are you?"

"Oh, I'm nearly all right."

"When did you come over here?"

"Oh—Tuesday."

"Tuesday?" Alix repeated, "did you really? I thought you were at school on Wednesday. Yes, don't you remember, you came to my breakfast table on Wednesday."

"No, that was Tuesday."

"Oh, was it?"

"Alix."

"Yes."

"Were you frightfully fed up with me over that?"

"Over what?"

"Well, I mean, when I was at your table——"

"Of course I didn't mind having you at my table! Is that what you mean?"

"No, I mean——"

"Oh, you would keep talking before grace, I remember. No, I didn't particularly mind. It was rather a nuisance at the time, but nothing really."

"Oh," said Joyce slowly. Then Alix hadn't thought of it as she had at all!

"I was trying to annoy you," she volunteered suddenly, to her own amazement.

"You were trying to annoy me?" Alix repeated incredulously.

"Yes."

"What ever for?"

"Oh, because—well, as a matter of fact, I was annoyed because of the night before, because of what you said."

"The night before?"

"Yes, when you met us in the school house passage, you know."

"Oh, you were annoyed because I reported you?"

"No, not exactly. Because of what you said."

"What did I say?"

"Because I screamed."

"Yes?"

"You said I must learn to control myself."

"Did I?"

"Yes."

"And you were so annoyed by that that you came to my breakfast table and tried to annoy me back?"

Alix seemed positively amused about it.

"Not exactly annoyed——"

After a pause Alix said: "I'm awfully sorry, I didn't mean to—to—annoy you, but I can't treat you differently from other people, can I?"

"No, I know."

"Well, you've forgiven me now, anyway, haven't you?"

"I suppose so."

"A very grudging forgiveness, I'm afraid."

"Oh, I do *wish* you weren't a prefect!" Joyce exclaimed suddenly.

"Why?"

"Because—Oh, I don't know, because it makes you so sort of distant. We can never do things like we used to because you're so far away, sort of."

"Oh, no," said Alix, "it doesn't make all that difference. It will make it more difficult for me to go about with you, I suppose, but I can come and say good night to you now. That's one advantage."

"But you won't want to."

"Don't be silly; of course I shall."

"Will you?"

"What's the matter with you, Joyce?"

"I thought you didn't like me any more now."

"Oh, well, you thought wrong. You mustn't be so silly."

"Then you're not really any different because of being a prefect?"

"No, of course not."

"But I'm more frightened of you now."

"Don't be absurd."

"But I am."

"But you mustn't be frightened of *me*, Joyce! It's simply ridiculous—besides, it'll spoil everything if I keep feeling you're not really saying what you think and so on because you're afraid. Please, Joyce, do be sensible, really, I mean to say—to be afraid of me, well——" she broke off laughing.

"Well," said Joyce, "I will try not to be."

"I'm sure you'll find it very easy. We must see more of each other; I must try to convince you that I'm not so terribly high and mighty after all! We used to have such fun last summer and I've seen so little of you since, something must be done about it, I must come and say good night to you sometimes."

"Oh, do!" Joyce exclaimed eagerly. "Oh, come often, awfully often; come every night, you will, won't you?"

"Not quite every night—I shan't be able to—but often."

"Well, as often as you can, you must, really; promise you'll come as often as you can!"

"I'll promise to come at least once a week then."

"Once a week! I shall be dead by the end of a week!"

"I think not, you've survived for some months without seeing me even once a fortnight regularly. Besides, I don't think the others would like it if I came too often."

"Oh, the others—who cares?"

"I do; you ought to. They've been good friends to you, haven't they?"

"Yes, but—Oh, I don't know, they don't understand me like you do."

"So I understand you, do I?"

"More than they do."

"More, perhaps."

"Alix, I *do* wish you could come and stay with me some day. I always have, only I didn't like to ask you. Last Easter, specially, when I was out getting those primroses I sent you, I did wish you were there."

"Did you? As long ago as that? I was awfully surprised at your sending me those primroses, you know, I had hardly spoken to you then."

"Oh, yes, you had," Joyce answered. "Don't you remember that dance when I was in bed with a sprained ankle and you came and talked to me?"

"Oh, yes, I remember, but I hadn't seen much of you all the same. I was awfully surprised to find who those flowers were from."

"Did you think it was awful cheek of me to send them?"

"Of course not, I thought it was simply sweet of you."

"But, Alix, do you think you ever would be able to come to us? I should so love it if you ever could. Couldn't you come next hols.?"

"No, I shall have to be in town then with my father. But some day when he is abroad perhaps——"

"Next summer, then?"

"Yes, I think next summer I could. It's very sweet of you. I can't very well have you back, you know, because I haven't anywhere definite to have you. You're very lucky having a home you can always count on."

"Well, you will come, won't you? I wish my house could be a home for you."

"No," Alix answered, "I've got my father, he makes homes for me and I for him. But if I knew that you'd be glad to have me it might simplify things a lot sometimes.

I'm taking you at your word because I always do, so you mustn't say anything you don't mean."

"I won't then, and I really do want you to come most awfully!"

"Thank you, then, I hope I will be able to soon. I say, you know, we really ought to stop talking, it must be frightfully late."

"Very well, good night."

"Good night, Joyce," said Alix for the second time that night.

Next morning another girl came to the San. with 'flu and was put in with Joyce and Alix.

When they were back at school again Alix often used to come to say good night to Joyce. Joyce in her little bed in the three room which she shared with Laura and Bess used to lie and wait every night for the familiar footstep in the passage outside. Sometimes she was disappointed, then she would go to sleep at last, having listened in vain until she knew that there was no longer any hope. But often as she lay and waited she would hear the light footsteps in the passage and the little knock on the door that seemed somehow typical of Alix. Then the door would open and Alix would come in in that same grey-blue kimono with little flowers on it which she had worn the first night she had come. That night, seeming now so long ago, when she had come just for a moment and her coming had puzzled Joyce so. The last night of that wonderful first term.

Now, when she came, she would shut the door and feel her way through the darkness to Joyce's bed. Then they would talk, talk in whispers in the darkness with their heads very close together. What is it that makes whispers so exciting, whispers and little suppressed laughs? Joyce could not have told, but she would have understood the question. But always Alix had to go, after staying for what

seemed less than a minute, and she would slip away silently, as she had come, leaving Joyce, warm and happy, to go to sleep in due course.

The others were surprised at first at Alix's repeated visits, but they soon became used to them and ceased to make objections, though to the end that strange friendship remained an insoluble problem to them.

So the term went on, and during the day Alix and Joyce saw very little of each other because Alix, being a prefect, naturally went with the prefects, and Joyce still went with Laura and Bess, but at night it was different. There was no public opinion to be considered then because no one knew but Laura and Bess, and there was no longer the difference between prefect and non-prefect, because at night, Alix was just Alix and Joyce was just Joyce.

XI

WHEN Joyce went back to Laykington after the Easter holidays she was really looking forward to the term very much. Of course, there was the pang of leaving home, but she was going back to Alix and really life was not so bad.

Of course, the first thing on arriving at school for a new term is to find out where and with whom you are sleeping, and this was the first thing Joyce did when she arrived. She was running upstairs to look on the list in the Matron's room when she met Bess.

Bess was effervescent, delighted to see Joyce and pleased with life in general—or so it seemed to Joyce.

"*Hullo*, my dear!" she said.

"Hullo," said Joyce; "had decent hols.? I say, do you know where I'm sleeping?"

"I did look on the thing," Bess answered, "but I've forgotten; Laura and I are together in Room X. Oh, yes, I know; you're in a two-room with a new hag. I've forgotten her name."

"Oh *Lord*!" Joyce exclaimed in horror, "how *perfectly foul*!"

"Oh, I dare say she'll be all right," Bess answered in an attempt to be consoling. "Anyway, you can squash her if she's awful, so that she'll keep quiet. So glad you're back —I must go and look for Laura; has she come yet?"

Without waiting for an answer Bess ran on downstairs.

Joyce went up and looked at the plan of the bedrooms, on Matron's door. In the square which indicated Room XIV she read:

J. Aylmer
J. Russell

"Now I suppose I had better find 'J. Russell,' she said to herself. "What a filthy notion putting me in with a new girl. I do hope the creature won't be homesick and keep howling."

Next she went and looked at the list of people coming back late. There again was J. Russell.

"That means sleeping all alone," thought Joyce; "how beastly."

After supper, Joyce went down to the changing room to hang up her coat. The place was silent and deserted, full of stray shoes, 'crosses, coats, cricket bats, and other impedimenta, also an overpowering smell of floor-polish, though the floor showed no particular signs of having received such attentions for some considerable time.

Joyce wandered over to her locker with the feeling that an acute fit of depression was coming on—three months, three great long months and the best part of the year too, May, June, July—but then there was Alix. With that thought came another, where was Alix? Joyce hadn't seen her yet. She went and looked at Alix's locker. It was empty. Her heart sank. Perhaps Alix was coming back late—but her name hadn't been on the late list; perhaps she had suddenly been taken ill, or her father had been. Perhaps she had been run over on the way to the station; anything might happen in London, and it's well known that people *do* get run over. For a long time Joyce stood and stared at the empty locker, not that there was anything interesting about it, but it seemed to be the only thing to do, in the

circumstances. Footsteps sounded on the wooden stairs that led to the changing room from the outside door. In a moment Joyce was tense, breathless, expectant; she knew now that she had been waiting for those footsteps while she had seemed to be so pointlessly engaged, staring at Alix's locker. It took less than a second for Joyce to convince herself that it was Alix—but it was not. The door opened and Joyce's eager gaze was met by the stolid regard of Eileen Ashford.

"Hullo," said Eileen.

"Hullo," said Joyce.

Eileen was a particularly uninteresting child in the lower fifth—probably in the "D" division, Joyce thought. Joyce felt that she had injured her and should have been apologizing instead of saying "Hullo" in that stupid voice. She watched Eileen while she took her gloves off, took her coat off, fumbled in her coat pocket (would she never go?), then she produced a rather battered paper bag and held it out to Joyce.

"Toffee?" she suggested.

"No thanks," Joyce answered gruffly, but at once she thought "decent of the kid, all the same—I didn't mean to sound so squashing; I must say something nice before she goes—what can I say?—er——" and then aloud:

"I say——"

But Eileen had gone. "Oh, well," said Joyce.

For fifteen minutes she waited in the changing room and then came more footsteps, but this time she was not disappointed. Again her eager gaze was fixed on the door, and this time it was met by that familiar, half-shy look which Alix used for any kind of meeting. Then her face broke into a smile as she recognized Joyce.

"Oh, hullo, Joyce!" she said.

"Hullo," said Joyce.

Alix went on, "Thanks so much for those gorgeous primroses—did you get my letter?"

"Oh, yes, thanks. I hadn't time to answer——"

"Well, of course not, I only posted it, when was it? about Friday, I think. Had a nice time since we last met?"

"Yes, heavenly, have you?"

"Yes," said Alix. "Yes," in a tone of quiet intensity that was surprising.

"Oh, Alix, I've got a two-room with an awful new girl, isn't it the limit?"

"Oh, well," Alix answered reassuringly, "she may turn out very nice after a little; you can't know much about her yet."

"Well, as a matter of fact, she's not back yet."

"Oh, well, then, she may be extremely nice."

"She *may*," Joyce answered grudgingly. "Anyway she is coming back late and I've got to sleep alone."

"Bad luck, I'll come and have a look at you. Where am I sleeping?"

"Oh, you're in the dorms, isn't it rotten?"

"Oh, heavens, who's the other prefect?—Oh, Gillian, I suppose, she is head, isn't she?"

"Oh, yes, and Monica's second."

"Good," said Alix; "she's nice. So is Gillian, of course. Well, I must go and let them know I'm not dead."

"As long as she's here," thought Joyce, "things won't be so bad."

* * * * *

The summer term started well. Alix had every prospect of getting into the tennis six, and Joyce was finding cricket a little less of a bore. Blaire's, Joyce's house, had four people in the first eleven, and would probably have two in the

tennis six; also they had some good swimmers. Blaire's was, in fact, a distinctly good house this term; Austin's was hardly better, and the others not as good.

Joyce was by no means outside the strong party feeling which went on between houses. Anything that she could do for Blaire's she would do, and she would swear, with her last breath if such an extreme measure should be needed, that no other house could touch it. Alix also, without swearing or taking it for granted that other houses were always either feeble or conceited, would do what she could for Blaire's, by working hard at her tennis, or any other way: there was hardly anyone with no house-feeling. There was no hurry in choosing the tennis six as the first match was not till the last Saturday in May, but there was no time to be lost in practising.

The result of this was that Alix had less time to spend with Joyce than she had had the summer before, but when the time was spent in such a good cause, Joyce could not grudge it—at least, she could not grudge it very much. Once or twice Alix was free, after supper, to walk round the playing fields or sit out under the trees with Joyce, and several times she came and said good night to her all alone in her two room. And then one afternoon after they had been back about a fortnight Miss Western sent for Joyce. It appeared that the girl who was to sleep with her was expected that evening.

"You'll be very kind to her, won't you, dear?" said Miss Western, "and try to make her happy."

(Why did the woman always call one "dear?")

Joyce muttered something which was received as an affirmative.

"That's right. Well, you'd better go and get ready for tea now. I will send for you when she arrives."

Joyce felt very apprehensive. To share a room for nearly three months with a person that no one knew anything about was no joke. She might turn out to be the most awful girl. She might very likely be some wretched child who would be put into the upper fourth or lower fifth and who would be terribly helpless and miserable and expect Joyce to look after her all the time. "I shall just have to show her that that sort of thing won't do at school." But she knew very well that she was cursed with a soft heart, and if the child did not know where to go she would have to take her, if she did not know what to do she would have to show her, if she cried she would have to comfort her. What a prospect!

About six, Joyce was fetched out of prep. and sent to Miss Western. Down the thickly carpeted stairs she went, down to the door where she knocked and went in. Miss Western was standing in the hall, but Joyce did not see her at all, her eyes were drawn and held by the girl who was standing by her, the girl she was to see so much of in the future.

She was rather taller than Joyce and slender, but her head was what Joyce chiefly noticed. Her hair, which was black, was Eton-cropped and lay in the neatest of waves. Her face was handsome with strikingly dark eyes, neat eyebrows and a straight nose; it was well modelled but pale. Even in that moment Joyce noticed that her face looked older than her probable age, although as afterwards appeared she was older than Joyce, being at that time just sixteen.

This certainly was not what she had expected.

"Oh, there you are, Joyce," said Miss Western, and, turning to the girl: "this is Joyce Aylmer with whom you are sleeping. She will show you round and tell you what to do."

In that moment Joyce remembered her own arrival most vividly, this was so much the same, only now she had exchanged places with Laura.

"Shall I take that?" she suggested, holding out her hand for the suit-case the girl was carrying.

"Thanks," she answered, and handed it to her. Joyce, as she took it, wondered how much those grey suède gloves had cost.

Joyce led the way upstairs. When they reached the landing they walked abreast.

"What's your name?" Joyce asked.

"You won't," the girl replied, "be able to pronounce it. English people never can. You had better call me Nita, that's what people do call me."

"Oh," said Joyce. Then curiosity got the better of her. "What is your name?" she asked.

"My name is Juanita."

"Oh," said Joyce again.

"You're sleeping here with me," she said as they reached Room XIV. She opened the door and Nita walked in, looked round the room with evident disgust and threw her hat down on the bed. Then she went over to the looking-glass and started doing her hair, tidy though it was. This was more a matter of habit than of necessity with her, and she almost invariably did it, as Joyce afterwards noticed, whenever she entered the bedroom.

"Are you English?" Joyce asked.

"I am cosmopolitan."

"How do you mean?"

"My father was partly Spanish, my mother is half French, and I was born in France and brought up everywhere."

Joyce was interested.

"Then you—have only a mother?" she hazarded.

"You mean is my father dead?" Nita asked baldly.

"Well—yes."

" I shouldn't think so," Nita answered.

Joyce was puzzled; did she mean that he was very much alive or that she really didn't know? But surely, people always knew important things like that; she must have meant it the other way.

" What are you? " Nita was asking.

" Me? Oh, I'm English," Joyce could not help a slight feeling that was almost inferiority as she answered. It seemed so terribly ordinary to be simply English.

" I expect you had better unpack now," she said; " this is your dressing table."

" Is it ?" said Nita, " I thought it was my wash-stand."

" Well, it's both."

" I see; and chest of drawers too. Rather crowded. What a room for two! "

" Oh, it's not bad as the two-rooms go," said Joyce.

" Good Lord! how ever do they go? "

Joyce ignored this remark, but she thought " That's pretty good cheek from a new girl," and " How am I to squash a creature like this? " she thought.

" You're not going down, are you? " Nita asked suspiciously, as Joyce went towards the door.

" Yes."

" No, don't; I want you up here; please stay with me," and in spite of herself Joyce stayed.

XII

"WELL," Alix said; "what is your new girl like?" She had come to say good night to Joyce and they talked in whispers, far enough from Nita not to be overheard.

"She's too sure of herself," Joyce answered; "too beastly conceited for anything—she thinks she's everybody already, and she's patent unsquashable—genuine sorbo! I think she's got an awful temper, though I haven't met it yet. It's going to be dreadful, Alix; I shall never be able to do anything with her. As I say, she never feels squashed."

"Perhaps," Alix suggested, "she feels it more than she shows. Anyway, I don't see why you need be so keen to squash her."

"Because she's so beastly bumpy."

"Well, you hardly know her yet, she may not be a bit like you think, really."

"Oh, mayn't she just!"

"Oh, Joyce, don't be so horrid. She's probably awfully nice really. Anyway, you might try to help her to settle in and all and feel at home in the place."

"Oh, she makes herself at home all right," Joyce interposed.

"Does she? well, that's a good thing. But really, Joyce, you will try to be nice to her, won't you? Because, after all, you can't tell, from what you know of her, whether she's happy or not. Anyway, it's supposed to be a tradition to

try to get the new girls settled quickly and make them as fond of it all as you are yourself."

"Am I?"

"Of course you are."

"How do you know?"

"Well, you're not very mystifying, are you? Now then, I must go. You will be nice to Nita, won't you?"

"Oh, Lord—I——"

"Please."

"Well—all right, I'll try to."

"Thanks, I knew you would, you are nice really, aren't you?"

"Am I?"

"Well, aren't you?"

"Well, am I?"

"Well, I haven't time to argue just now——"

"I'm not arguing; I'm asking."

"Well, I haven't time to not argue or to answer. Good night."

"Good night."

Alix went out and shut the door.

"What's the name of your grey girl?" Nita asked from the other side of the room.

"Alix Romer."

"She looks terribly saintly!"

"She's a perfect darling."

"Oh, it's as bad as that, is it?"

Joyce didn't answer, Nita seemed to be talking nonsense.

Nita made quite a sensation at Laykington. She was so bold and so boldly beautiful, dashing, daring, foreign, something new, in fact—and she could talk. Joyce found her, one day, the centre of an animated group in the changing room.

"Of course," she was saying, "you never get to bed till two or three—but I don't mind."

"Well, what do you do then, all night?" someone asked.

"Dance mostly," Nita answered in her most blasé tone, "or go to some show or night club or something." Never having been to a night club, Nita was a little doubtful about this last shot, but she knew people who had and could answer any questions likely to be put. No one would have guessed her guilty secret.

"Coo," said somebody. "What a rag!"

"Oh, you get awfully bored with it," said Nita; "but, of course, I can never sleep if I go to bed early because I'm accustomed to staying up. It does wear out your shoes and stockings though; mine never seem to be fit to put on after I've worn them three or four times, and decent shoes are so beastly expensive, I can't afford to get myself a new pair every few days!"

"Do you like the flat-heeled shoes?" asked José, who had been drawn into the admiring little group.

"Not for dancing—good Lord, no! Nobody wears those now; they're so uncomfortable to dance in and they *do* look so awful; I wouldn't be seen dead in them."

Joyce remembered that even Nita's school shoes had the highest heels that could be worn under Matron's watchful eyes.

"My school shoes make me positively sick," Nita went on; "but, of course, you can't wear anything decent at school."

She went gaily on from one thing to another, suggesting always the quantity, quality, and expensiveness of her clothes and her complete intimacy with the world, the flesh and the devil. Joyce listened spellbound, admiring, marvelling—so much so, indeed, that she completely omitted to take the

pinch of salt with Nita's words which they so surely required.

Although Joyce clearly admitted to herself that Nita showed off—for even if she did have such wonderful clothes and everything it was hardly good taste to point it out so clearly—and although she still thought her conceited, she could not help feeling her spell. Nita had a fascination all her own; Joyce had never before met anything like it. She gave such an impression of knowing the world, and being capable of dealing with it, of being grown up when at home, and allowed to do what she liked, and of moving in a gay and splendid world which was entirely unknown to Joyce. She knew everything worth knowing, and had done everything worth doing. She had read all the books that Joyce had not been allowed to read and seen all the more "daring" plays. But to Joyce's questions "What's it like?", "What's it about?", "What's all the fuss about?" she would merely answer, "It's perfectly right. No earthly harm in it."

"Mummie," Joyce remarked once, "said that 'The Moonless Night' was a 'horrid' book."

"Nonsense," said Nita; "perfectly all right. Your mother must be very narrow minded."

Joyce considered this for some time. "I don't think she is," she said. After another pause she added, "I wonder if I am narrow minded."

"I don't expect you are really," said Nita reassuringly; "only narrow—narrow *visioned*."

"I don't want to be," Joyce repeated.

"You should widen your outlook."

"I don't know how to."

"I'll do it for you, then," said Nita, and laughed.

During the next year she did widen it considerably; she widened it with a hatchet. It was painful, but very interesting.

For some time after Nita came, Joyce saw very little of Alix. As Nita was new she had to look after her a good deal, and though at first she found this a most troublesome and annoying duty she soon became reconciled to it. In fact, as Nita gained prestige at Laykington, Joyce came to take a sort of pride in her, regarding her, in a way, as her own discovery. Joyce would have liked to have been able to feel a little that Nita was her property, a feeling one often had in looking after a new girl, but Nita was different. It was impossible to think of her as anyone's property. She had too strong a will of her own.

It was about a fortnight after Nita's arrival that Alix came again to say good night to Joyce. It was a Friday night and Joyce was feeling happy with the prospect of the week-end beginning the next day. They talked for a little and relapsed into silence.

"Do you remember," said Alix after a pause, "how we used to go out last summer and read?"

"Yes, rather."

"It was nice, didn't you think?" she suggested diffidently.

"It was topping," said Joyce.

"We must do it again this year. I've thought of lots of things I'd like to read you."

"Oh, do let's!" Joyce exclaimed; "when can we go?"

"Well, are you doing anything to-morrow afternoon?"

"To-morrow? Oh, of course, it's Saturday, how splendid. No; I'm free; do let's go then."

"That's settled then?" said Alix.

"Yes, to-morrow afternoon."

When Alix went away Joyce fell asleep with a lovely warm feeling of pleasure to come.

The next day when Joyce and Nita were upstairs changing after dinner Nita said:

"Let's go into the vill. this afternoon, Joy."

"Sorry," said Joyce, "I can't; I promised to go somewhere with Alix."

"Oh, bother Alix, what ever do you want to go with her for?"

"I like her."

"I'm sure she's much too good to be interesting," said Nita; "she's got such a saint-like face and everything. She looks as if she'd faint if you swore and think it immoral to powder—you know the type!"

"Oh," said Joyce doubtfully, "I don't think she's like that, at all, really."

"I'm sure she is," said Nita. "Well, you're coming with me then?"

"No, really; I must go with Alix."

"Oh, Joy, you *might* not; I specially want you this afternoon."

"But I promised Alix."

"Well, tell her you suddenly remembered you'd promised me first."

"I can't very well, Nita, really. I must go with her."

"Oh, very well," Nita broke out suddenly: "go with her then. Whether you promised her or not, it's obvious you don't want to go with me. Don't stand there like a blithering idiot; go on, go and find your precious Alix, and I hope you'll enjoy your afternoon's entertainment. I'm sure it will be irreproachable anyway; anything she does is bound to be. Go *on*, will you! Go and find your good little prefect and don't stand gaping at me like that!"

"But Nita—I mean—I——"

"Get out of this, will you?" Nita looked so threatening that Joyce went.

She met Alix in the changing room and they set off together. It was lovely to be going through the long grass with Alix again; lovely, when they arrived, to sit under the same old tree with her and listen to her reading—and yet Joyce was not happy. She was not *really* listening to Alix, she was not rejoicing in it all as she used to last summer, but why wasn't she? Alix had meant it to be just the same as it used to be, so had Joyce. But it wasn't; it wasn't because Alix was a prefect, because she was just Alix when they were alone together. It wasn't because Joyce knew her better. Joyce liked her all the better for that. No; it was because Nita had come. It was because Nita was angry with her that Joyce could not be quite happy now; it was because Nita was so exciting that Joyce could not be quite satisfied. It was true, in a way, what she had said in her anger. It *was*, somehow, just a little too irreproachable.

For Alix, too, that afternoon was not quite what she had meant it to be. Joyce's vague uneasiness and dissatisfaction had spoilt the atmosphere, and Alix, as sensitive as a photographic plate, felt strangely disturbed by it.

Once she stopped reading.

"Are you really liking it?" she asked.

"Oh, rather!" Joyce answered, "I'm loving it."

Alix looked hard at her.

"You're sure you want to go on?"

"Yes, of course I do."

"You're not—not worried or anything, are you?"

"No, why ever should I be?"

"I don't know."

"Did you think I wasn't listening? Because I was; I was listening to every single word."

"Oh no, I knew you were listening, only——"

"What, then?"

"I don't know. Let's go on."

They went on. They read till they heard the chapel bell, but it was not like it used to be. Joyce *was* worrying; it was no good telling herself and Alix that she was not, she was worrying about Nita. It was no good, either telling herself that she didn't care what Nita thought of her; she did care, she cared very much.

Nita would not speak to her when they went up to bed. Joyce went up first, and after a few minutes Nita came in, looking as passionless as ever.

"Hullo," said Joyce; there was a short silence, then she added:

"Oh, cheers. Sunday to-morrow; late breakfast."

This remark was received with as little enthusiasm as the one before.

"Are you going to have a bath?" Joyce asked. Nita continued to ignore her.

"I say, Nita," she said, "you're not still cross with me for going out with Alix are you? Because, really, you know, after I'd promised I'd——"

"Oh, go to hell!" said Nita suddenly.

Joyce fell back for the moment, being too surprised to know what to say, but presently returned to the conflict.

"Nita."

No answer.

"Nita, do stop being beastly, and listen to me. Can't you understand that when you've promised to go with somebody you have to go with them even if you'd rather go with somebody else?"

"No; but I can understand that you have to if you want to get out of going with somebody else."

"Oh, shut up; you know I didn't do it for that."

"I don't know anything of the sort,"

"Oh, Nita, you *do*. Anyway, there are lots more Saturdays."

"Yes, lots more—for you to spend with Alix."

"Or with you."

"For you to spend with Alix."

"But truly, I *want* to go with you."

"Well, you can't; at least, you can't go with me and Alix."

"Why not?"

"Because it's an impossibility."

Joyce was silent for a minute.

"I don't see why," she said at last.

"Well, are you coming with me next Saturday?"

"All right."

Peace was, for the time being, re-established.

The next Saturday passed perfectly peacefully, Nita and Joyce spending the afternoon together in the village; but for the Saturday after they made no plans.

The tennis six had now been chosen, and Alix was one of them. Nita, also, had shown herself to be a very strong player, but had not been chosen for the six, partly, no doubt, because she was so very new.

Although the fact of the six having been chosen did not give Alix any more free time, but rather less, it happened that she was free for the next Saturday after that spent by Joyce with Nita in the village. It again occurred to her that it would be nice to spend the afternoon with Joyce and, though a little doubtful this time, she did suggest it to Joyce.

Joyce also was doubtful at first. Would it, she wondered, result in another scene like that of a fortnight ago, if she went with Alix? And yet Alix had been her friend before she had ever heard of Nita, and what right had Nita to prevent their going together? And, anyway, she had gone

with her the week before; this week she would go with Alix.

"Saturday?" Joyce repeated slowly to cover her moment of indecision. "Yes; that would be splendid. I'd love it."

"Nita can say what she likes," she told herself; "I've got a perfect right to go with Alix if I want to, and I do want to, so there." This did not prevent her from being rather apprehensive as to how Nita would take it.

On Saturday morning Joyce broke it to her, when Nita said:

"What shall we do this afternoon, Joy?"

Joyce answered, "I'm going out with Alix."

"What for?"

"Because I like her."

"Why do you like her?"

"Because I do."

There was a pause and Joyce was just thanking her lucky stars that Nita had taken it so quietly when she was disillusioned.

"Look here," said Nita slowly, "if you go out with Alix again this afternoon, I've done with you."

"Don't be absurd."

Nita's answer was a look. It was quite sufficient. Joyce realized that the line she had taken was neither useful nor wise.

"But why on earth shouldn't I go out with Alix?" she asked after due consideration.

"I've told you before, you can't go with us both."

"Well, but I don't 'go' with Alix, I only just go out with her sometimes."

"Well, don't go with her this afternoon, *please*."

Joyce never failed to feel indescribably baffled by Nita's sudden changes of tactics.

"But I promised——"

"Oh, never mind that."

"But I can't just not turn up after that."

"Oh, yes, you can!"

"But what shall I say when she asks why I didn't come?"

"Say you'd promised me first and forgotten."

"But I hadn't."

"That doesn't matter. You tell her you had."

Joyce was silent for a minute, then she said, "I don't think I'd better. Alix might mind."

"She must be a fool if she'd mind that," said Nita with a complete disregard of how she would behave under such circumstances. And so, in the end, Joyce, in this dilemma, followed the law of least effort and allowed herself to be carried off by Nita.

In the evening after they got back she took every possible precaution against meeting Alix, but circumstances were too strong for her. Matron seized upon her, just when she was hurrying down to her sitting-room, and sent her up to the dormitories on an errand. On the dormitory landing she ran into Alix.

"Oh, Joyce, there you are!" said Alix, "where *did* you get to this afternoon?"

"Oh," Joyce answered hurriedly, "I went into the vill. with Nita because I suddenly remembered I'd promised to go with her this afternoon—at least, I hadn't exactly promised her I would, only she thought I had, at least, I mean, she didn't know you'd asked me to go with you, and she thought, you see, that before I'd said I'd go with you I'd kind of promised to go with her, and so I had to go, because otherwise she would have been so upset, you see."

"Yes," said Alix slowly, "I see."

"I'm so glad you do," Joyce began, greatly relieved. "I was sure you——"

Something in Alix's expression cut her short and made her want to get away.

"Do you know where Monica is?" she asked quickly, "Matron wants her."

"Taking ret. in Room VI."

"Oh," said Joyce dubiously; "thanks."

"I'm taking it myself in a minute; I'll tell her," said Alix, and went off downstairs.

"Thanks awfully."

It was coals of fire, though Alix had not meant it to be.

XIII

JOYCE was standing in front of her mirror combing her hair. She combed it up from underneath till it stood out all round her head in a reddish halo.

"My dear child," said Nita, "you have got priceless hair!"

"I know," Joyce answered discontentedly, "it's awfully silly stuff—you are lucky having hair like yours, always tidy and in marvellous waves and things—I think black hair is awfully fascinating anyway."

"*Lucky!*" said Nita with a little laugh. "Darling, it's not luck, it's hard work!"

"Is it?"

"Rather; it's any amount of trouble, not to mention expense, having it waved and cut and everything, it costs a lot one way and another."

"Oh," said Joyce; "Yes, I suppose it would; but it does look nice."

"You ought to take more trouble with yours," said Nita, regarding her critically; "it could probably be made very nice. Of course, it's not at all the same style as mine, but then, neither is your face, so that's all to the good. You really ought to make more of it."

"Oh, I can't—anyway, it's such a futile colour."

"Oh, it's not a bad colour; it would be better if it was more definitely red, certainly, but it would get redder if you used the right kind of shampoos for it. You must take

more trouble with it; after all, you know you're nearly grown up and you do owe it to yourself to look as nice as you can. Let me do it for you."

She took the comb and did Joyce's hair herself.

"There, that looks better, doesn't it? Only this bit ought to go more like that, do you see how I mean? You could easily train it to."

"Yes," said Joyce, "it doesn't look too bad, but I wish it was wavy."

"It is."

"Properly, I mean,"

"Well, you should have it waved; but you can't at school, of course; still, you could water-wave it."

"Oh, *do* let's!" Joyce exclaimed.

"Right oh; damp it a bit, that's right; now have you got another comb? That's it, and two of mine. I wish I'd got some proper combs here, but I haven't. Now then; one there, that's right—don't touch it—now the other side—like—that. It ought to make a bit of a wave."

Joyce watched the proceedings in the glass and laughed at her reflection.

"This *is* fun!" she said. "Will it make a nice proper wave?"

"It ought to make a fairly respectable one."

"May I take the combs out now?"

Nita laughed. "My dear child, you'll have to leave them in over night."

"Oh!" Joyce was disappointed. "I want to take them out now."

"Well, you can if you like; but they won't have done any good."

It was an unanswerable argument, but in the end Joyce got up at about ten at night and took the combs out.

"They're too uncomfortable," she said; "I can't sleep with them in.

Nita, who was also awake, laughed. "What about permanent waving," she said, "if water-waving's too painful to bear?"

"Oh, that's different," said Joyce. "But, anyway, nothing would make me really pretty, so what's the good of bothering?"

"Don't be silly; you can get anything if you want it enough."

"No, you can't."

"What can't you get, then?"

Joyce was silent for a minute.

"Happiness," she suggested.

"Rot."

"Well—love, then."

"Rot."

"It isn't rot, it's true."

"It isn't true, it's rot."

But as this argument did not seem to make much progress they soon abandoned it and went to sleep.

Life with Nita was by no means peaceful; she was a restless and unpeaceful person at best, and when crossed she was far from best. This often happened, although Joyce, knowing her to be possessed of an unusually violent temper, was rather careful how she crossed her. There were times when Nita was extraordinarily sweet and kind to Joyce, and Joyce, though prejudiced against her at first, was won over by her strength of character combined with these fits of extreme sweetness and the kind of humour which was indivisible from her. Before the beginning of June, Nita had not only completely won Joyce over to herself, but had also acquired a large number of other friends and admirers

in the school as well as a fair sprinkling of enemies. These last she gained chiefly by her habit of saying what she thought about people she disliked, quite unreservedly and in the most mixed company.

The worst quarrel that Nita and Joyce ever had in those early days happened, like most of Joyce's troubles at that time, on a Saturday. They began badly even before breakfast.

There was considerable discussion between them as to who was to fetch the washing water. Nita flatly refused to, although it was her turn, saying, as her only excuse, that she couldn't be "fagged."

At last Joyce fetched some water for heself, but for herself only.

"Haven't you got me any?" Nita asked when she came back.

"No," said Joyce.

"Why not?"

"Couldn't be fagged."

"You lazy brute," said Nita coldly, regarding Joyce with a look of contempt that can only be described as withering. (It was, in fact, one of her star turns, but Joyce never got much hardened to it.)

"It's you that's lazy," said Joyce; "you said you couldn't be fagged before I did."

"Well, I couldn't."

"Well then, you're a lazy brute, not me."

"I expect you've got a very wonderful argument," Nita answered cuttingly; "but I'm afraid I don't quite follow it. —I'm going to wash in the bathroom," she added, with her hand on the door handle.

"You'll be late, then," said Joyce.

"It'll be your fault if I am," she said, and went. As it happened, they were both late.

That afternoon Joyce took her revenge by going off to the wood with Bess and Laura instead of to the village with Nita.

They wandered in the pleasant greenness of the wood where the bluebells were over and the roses just beginning, and Joyce was happy for the space of the afternoon.

"You hardly ever come with us now, Joy," said Bess reproachfully, "it's always Nita."

"I know," Joyce answered; "you see I had to look after her when she was new."

"Well, she's not new now, is she?" Laura put in.

"No, I suppose she isn't; but she always sort of seems to expect me to go with her."

"Well, you ought to teach her not to 'sort of expect' anything of the sort!"

"She does annoy me sometimes," said Joyce, thoughtfully. "This morning she was simply too awful for anything—I can't stand her when she gets like that."

"Like what?" asked Bess, and Joyce's answer was to recount the incident of the washing water. Laura and Bess instantly seized on the story, as a possible way of dividing Joyce and Nita, and so recovering their friend.

"Good Lord!" said Laura, "what cheek the kid's got! Think of a new girl behaving like that! Why don't you squash her, Joyce? That's what she wants."

Joyce smiled gloomily. "You don't know her," she answered; "she's no kid."

It was not till after tea that Joyce and Nita met again. Joyce had gone up to Room XIV to fetch a book and was searching vainly for it when Nita came in.

For a moment there was an ominous silence. Then Nita spoke—

"So you're back?"

Joyce glanced apprehensively at her, startled by her tone.

"Yes," she answered, "of course."

Nita's inscrutable eyes were fixed on her. "You said you were coming with me."

Joyce answered frankly, "Well, you were so beastly this morning that I thought you wouldn't want me."

"You promised to come with me," said Nita slowly; "and then you went off with those creatures."

The unspeakable contempt that she managed to put into her voice when referring to Bess and Laura was by no means lost on Joyce. She was nettled by it, as Nita had meant her to be.

"They're my friends," she said, "and very good friends too."

"Most wretched creatures," Nita reiterated; "and so are you; the wretchedest of the lot, I should say."

"I'm jolly well not!" Joyce answered hotly.

"Oh, 'jolly well' aren't you?—Joyce, you argue like a child of twelve—as you do everything."

"Well, of course, you're so grown up and wonderful—at least, you think you are—I don't wonder you find me rather a kid."

"Rather a kid!" Nita answered, mockingly, "yes, just *slightly*."

"I wonder you condescend to speak to me," said Joyce.

"I wonder I do," Nita answered coolly, and for a minute or two she stared at Joyce silently with a look that had sapped the courage of braver people.

"God!" she said at last, "if you knew the fool you are—you and your Lauras and Besses, your games and your school, you narrow-minded little simpleton. I thought you were a cut above that sort of thing, but you're just like the rest of them, only, if possible, worse, since you have no will

of your own and next to no brains. No will and no brains, no looks and no attraction; what ever were you born for? Oh," she continued quickly, as Joyce showed signs of answering, "Oh, go and talk to your friends; it's all you're fit for, it's a sheer waste of time talking to you. I don't believe you even understand what I'm saying! Heavens, child, don't look like that! You can't help your face, I know, but you can help that fatuous expression. Well, I have nothing more to say, nothing, at least, that you could understand, so there's no good in my wasting any more time on you."

After that she went.

Joyce felt quite overpowered by this extraordinary display of what seemed to her to be hatred. She had never known what it was to be hated by Nita and could not therefore understand that this outburst was just Nita's ordinary way of expressing herself when crossed in any way.

For some time after Nita had left the room Joyce stood leaning against the dressing-table with her eyes fixed on the door almost as though she expected Nita to come back; then she roused herself and began to review the situation. She began by pointing out to herself what she already knew, that it had all been Nita's fault from beginning to end, that she herself had been entirely blameless and that Nita had treated her abominably. From that she passed on to the stage of assuring herself that she would never speak to Nita again, and from this came various mental dramas in which Joyce cast freezing glances at Nita or refused, on meeting her some years later, to shake hands with her. After this phase came a less pleasant one, one spent in wondering how life would go on for the rest of the term in a two-room where the inhabitants refused to speak to one other.

After a few days she was no longer in doubt on this last

point, having discovered that life would go very badly indeed. In fact, she very soon came to the conclusion that life would be impossible unless they could bring themselves to speak to one another again, and that pretty soon. But the difficulty about this was, who was to speak first? Of course, when one person had spoken, it would be easy enough for the other one to answer—if she wanted to; but it would not be very easy to speak first. However, on the fifth night, Joyce braced herself for the effort and said

"Have you seen my sponge anywhere?"

Nita stared at her for a minute in silence.

"Of course not."

It would have been the most natural thing in the world for her to have seen it, but she did not wish to be *too* pleasant just yet; after all, she felt, it was very nice of her to answer the question at all.

Joyce was undaunted. A few minutes later she returned to the attack.

"Didn't you nearly die in prayers this evening?"

"What are you talking about?" Nita asked coldly. "Was the fish bad again at supper?"

"No; I mean didn't you nearly die when Wuzzy had that terrific sneezing fit suddenly in the middle of that awful prayer about lambs—you know."

"Personally I never listen to the prayers," said Nita; "but no one could have helped hearing the old bird sneezing."

Peace was in a fair way to be established once more.

Often after this Joyce found that keeping the peace was a very uphill job, but she had a great admiration for Nita, and was, in fact, really fond of her, and so she did her best to avoid quarrels. No one but a saint could have avoided quarrelling with Nita sometimes, but Joyce, though she was far from being a saint, managed surprisingly well.

To Bess and Laura this friendship seemed a very strange and lamentable affair, and many people at Laykington shared this view, at least to the extent of thinking it strange. In fact, when Bess asked once "what does Joyce see in that girl?" and Laura answered, "what does the girl see in Joyce?" they expressed the thoughts of many people besides themselves.

Joyce did not much care what they thought. She unconsciously adopted Nita's attitude of extreme superiority and condemned any or all of her school-fellows, when they annoyed her, as a pack of idiots not worth considering. As for Nita, she did not care what anybody thought or said; only if they said it to her they "got it hot" as Joyce put it to herself, not without some little pride in her friend's capabilities.

Nita, though she had plenty of enemies, was pretty generally admired. It was, however, in class that she shone brightest of all. There was always "sport" to be had when Nita was in the class, and everyone appreciated this. Her manners, when she chose, were irreproachable, but if the staff annoyed her they "got it hot" too, though in a different way, for she feared no one, in school or out. She would stand up to the staff in a way that recalled the heroines of say five years before, whose histories had been freshly embellished in each repetition. She would cheek them, contradict them, laugh at them, but it was so skilfully done that only the most discerning realized it, and even then they found it hard enough, often, to get their own back.

There is nothing, of course, that any form enjoys so much as seeing a mistress scored off, again and again, while she herself is unaware of it, or powerless to retaliate. But when Nita got the whole form reported they saw her efforts in a different light.

It happened in an English lesson one morning, when

they were getting their essays back. Miss Wayland, the English mistress, criticized Nita's rather harshly, saying, among other things, that the punctuation was atrocious and the sentences much too long. To this Nita replied that she did not see that that sort of thing mattered.

"But, my dear girl," Miss Wayland exclaimed, "one cannot read it!"

"Cannot one?" said Nita.

"What did you say?" Miss Wayland inquired threateningly. She was the type who believed in taking the bull by the horns.

"I said 'cannot one?'" Nita repeated, wearily patient.

"And what did you mean by that?"

"What I said."

"How dare you speak to me like that?" said Miss Wayland, suddenly deciding to flare up. "Either you apologize or you will go straight out of the room."

"What ever for?" said Nita. "I only just asked a question about my essay. Don't you like us to ask questions?"

"Not unless you can ask politely."

"But I was trying to be polite; I never meant to hurt your feelings."

There ensued a general collapse. Everyone laughed—they laughed quite loud.

Miss Wayland shouted at them.

"Be quiet, please."

The laughter died down and she turned to Nita.

"Will you go at once, or must I report you?" she asked.

"Go where?"

"Go out of the room."

"To be or not to be?" Nita murmured. There was more laughter. The class was getting out of hand.

"I shall report the whole form," said Miss Wayland suddenly.

Consternation reigned. A tumult of protest arose at once from all but Nita.

"Oh, but please——"

"Oh, but really, Miss Wayland——"

"But we weren't doing anything!——"

"But, Miss Wayland, please——"

And so on.

"Well," she said at last, when the tumult had died down; "if Nita likes to consider herself entirely responsible for this disturbance and take the consequences accordingly, she may do so, but I must warn her that the consequences will be serious."

"Oh, my sainted godfathers," said Nita indignantly, "I was as innocent as the——"

"Nita! your comments are not required. Do you wish to make yourself responsible for this affair, or not?"

"Well, what do you take me for?" said Nita.

"Will you please answer at once?" said Miss Wayland in her most ominous voice.

"Certainly," Nita answered pleasantly. "Well, frankly, I don't."

There was absolute silence for the first time since Nita had started this disturbance. The entrance of the headmistress could not have stopped it more effectually than those few words of hers.

But Nita feared no one, and she was silent too.

"Very well," said Miss Wayland; "the form will be reported." The tension was broken and the suppressed noises began again.

On the following Saturday afternoon they all had to do an hour's work, and some of them had to miss matches for

it. Nita was definitely unpopular for the moment; even Joyce could not help noticing it, though she was in a different form, and people would not commit such a breach of good taste as to tell her what they thought of her friend. She heard them talking, and they talked all the more because Nita went to the San. on Saturday morning and missed that hour's work. But she came back on Monday morning and the talking very soon stopped.

But Nita had her friends as well as her enemies; she had a very winning way with her, and Joyce, though every time they quarrelled she swore to break off the friendship, could be won back as completely as ever by a very slight exertion on Nita's part. It was not so much that Joyce was weak as that Nita was strong, very strong she was, stronger than Alix.

She was such "fun" and she said such amusing things. Everything about school seemed to strike her as so funny, rather contemptible, certainly, but funny all the same, and her companions got the benefit of her amusement. But her humour was hardly ever without a sting, she was utterly unmerciful.

Joyce had, by the end of the term, entirely cut herself off from her former friends. Bess and Laura often reviewed the situation and talked it over and over, but they had given up all hope of retrieving Joyce long before the holidays came.

One Saturday, while watching a match, they had really had it out. They were lying on rugs and leisurely chewing grass when Laura suddenly said :

"Joyce and Nita just are thick these days."

"Yes," said Bess, "Joyce simply goes with her the whole time now."

"I do think Joyce is a beastly fickle rotter," Laura

continued thoughtfully; "I mean, she always said she liked us so awfully and all that, but she started right away by getting kind of soft about Alix."

"I never could understand that," Bess said; "I mean—well—was she really *friends* with Alix, or was she sort of keen on her?"

"She can't," Laura answered, "have been keen on her. They were much too pally for that. It wasn't that Joyce just sort of followed her about like a dog, Alix used to ask her to go out—that's not the way one treats keenites, is it?"

"Yes, I suppose they must have been friends, but she might have said when she was sick of us."

"Oh, she's a little—Oh, well, I dare say we're well rid of her. And now she goes about all day with that ghastly woman, Nita, and she's got such a swelled head she thinks she's everybody."

"Oh, she's caught that from Nita," said Bess. "Oh, that girl! I've never met *anyone* who thought so much of herself as she does."

"Yes, she's easily the most awful hag in the school."

"Oh, I don't know; she's not as bad as Mollie Gilby and people."

"Oh, well, she's not *lunie*," Laura admitted, "but she is the most—I don't know, I think she's just awful, but the extraordinary part about it is that she's rather popular, you know."

"Oh, she sucks up to people like blazes; she can be perfectly sweet if she wants to. She tried it on me once, you know; I told you about it; and just when I was thinking she was rather decent Kip told me she's said I was the most awful fool she'd ever struck and that I was trying to suck up to her, if you please!"

Bess was quite flushed with indignation.

"I know," Laura agreed, "she doesn't mind *what* she says about people, and it's generally all a lie, and talk about saving your own skin——"

They did talk about it for some time. In fact, they were still talking about it when Nita and Joyce came past them.

They looked at Bess and Laura; then Nita said something to Joyce and they both laughed and passed on.

"There they go," said Laura; "well, I've done with Joyce, anyway."

"Joyce has done with us," Bess answered; "so you needn't trouble."

Joyce certainly had.

Alix, watching the match from the other end of the field, was thinking much the same thing. She was sitting with two other prefects, but they were talking to each other so that she was free to follow her own thoughts.

"Joyce," she thought, "is tired of me. Or rather, not so much that, but she's so taken up with Nita, and that's doing her no good. She isn't half as nice as she used to be, and if this goes on she'll get absolutely spoilt! I wonder if I could do anything, I wonder if I ought to try. But perhaps Nita will tire of her after this term. Anyway, I'll leave it over till next term and see what happens then."

Alix was no coward; but she was glad to avoid interference on this point. She had an idea that it would probably not be well received, and even guessed that it might be useless.

The last few weeks of the summer term slipped away very quickly. Even the great adventure of the last day was soon over, and Joyce was back again at Stonebridge, out of harm's way.

Alix went to France with her father. If Joyce's invitation had been confirmed lately she might have gone to her, but Joyce, as Alix well knew, had forgotten all about it.

Anyway, Joyce did not want Alix now, she wanted Nita, but after hearing a little about Nita's dazzling home life she had not the courage to invite her to Stonebridge.

Nita was in France, too, for the holidays, at a fashionable seaside resort, a long way away from Alix. As for Joyce, she simply stayed at home, and was pretty contented on the whole, surrounded by her family. She wrote to Nita once, but Nita did not answer, and in the atmosphere of home she seemed less real and less desirable. Joyce did not write again.

XIV

THE autumn came again with its falling leaves and dying flowers; came and brought with it the autumn term, "the best term for work" it is said to be; however, that may be, it is certainly the most muddled and muddling term to start with. Forms all different, form rooms changed, and new girls, new girls, new girls! Horrible little intruders everywhere—that was how Joyce saw it. She was far from hard-hearted, but she had forgotten to some extent the time when she was new herself, and she resented the presence of these depressed and helpless atoms that were for ever drifting about the place like sticks in the stream. She had, in spite of herself, a feeling of responsibility towards them, and she resented this feeling even more than she resented their presence. Again and again she would ask herself why she need trouble about them, she would even go the length of explaining to herself that it was not through her that they had come there, and that it was not, therefore, her business to see that they got on all right. But herself would answer simply "well, you must, anyhow," without giving reasons or attempting to argue the point, and there was no gainsaying it.

Nita felt quite differently on this point. She frankly despised and disapproved of new girls—especially helpless ones, and she tried to persuade Joyce to do the same.

"Why can't you leave the fools alone?" she suggested.

"They do look so feeble," Joyce answered; "I always feel I ought to do something about it."

"Why on earth? It's not your fault that all these awful kids have landed up here, is it? Besides, they look such a putrid lot, they aren't worth bothering about."

"No, I suppose not, but, after all, even nice people are new some time. You were new yourself only last term."

"Thanks for the compliment," Nita answered with a slight bow, "but nice people can look after themselves. Witness myself when new!"

No arguments of Nita's could make Joyce turn away from the pitiful sight of a new girl trying to do something the wrong way because she knew no better. It was no use arguing; their presence worried and annoyed Joyce and there was no help for it. It annoyed Nita too, but she had her own way of dealing with the problem. She brought up new girls in a wholesome fear of her. As the term wore on, however, the new girls fitted themselves in, and all the beginning-of-term muddles straightened themselves out.

At last Joyce was in the removes. It had seemed so grand and wonderful from a distance, but when she reached it it was only to find that the glamour of it had gone, along with the people of the year before, up to the sixth.

Nita was in remove A. Joyce would have liked to have been in it too, but as she was neither exceptionally clever nor exceptionally hard working she remained in B.

Nita and Joyce were sleeping together again. Nita, who was unemotional apart from her sudden bursts of anger, made no comment on discovering the fact. Joyce, who had a risky habit of saying whatever came into her head, exclaimed:

"Oh, how topping! Oh, aren't you glad, Nita?"

They were both glad. They felt now, even more

strongly than before, that they were the only people in the school for each other. Nita, it is true, had a few privileged friends besides Joyce. There was Margaret Standerton who posed as a " Society girl " and was going to be presented when she left, and Binnie Brailsford, whose desk was covered with photographs of matinée idols, also Vivene Dawson, whose father was some sort of commercial " king " in America. They were a queer crew, but Joyce, though she had no particular qualification, had no call to be jealous of them, except when she had quarrelled with Nita.

Most of the school people Nita and Joyce looked on as boring; for which they stigmatized them as " schoolgirlish "; boring, brainless, and immature, Nita thought them, and Joyce, the mature Joyce, took her cue from Nita.

Joyce came, during her friendship with Nita, to think herself wonderfully wise and grown up. She felt, after all that Nita had told her, that she knew the world pretty well and could deal with it accordingly. In fact, she was fast becoming as abominably conceited as Nita herself.

Nita had affected Joyce's very appearance. She came back in September with a pair of high-heeled patent leather shoes, and even did her hair in a different way. She now brought it across her forehead in a great loop, and she and Nita both thought this an immense improvement. Alix did not agree with them, but her opinion was, perhaps fortunately, not asked. Laura and Bess thought it frankly vulgar. Their opinion was not asked either, but they gave it all the same. It was not well received.

Alix was deeply worried by the change in Joyce, but having a reticent nature she never spoke of things that worried her. No one knew that she had noticed any change, least of all Joyce herself. Sometimes she wondered why Nita had come to Laykington. She did no good to anybody

there. It took no great powers of insight to see that. The effect on anyone who went with her much was definitely bad; but then, the people who did go with her had not been favourites of Alix's to begin with, except, of course, Joyce.

In a way, Alix despised herself for not being able to keep Joyce from Nita; in a way she despised Joyce for following Nita so slavishly. Constantly she wondered whether it was in her power to do anything for Joyce, and very often she decided that it was not.

And then one day things came to a head quite suddenly.

One Saturday afternoon, soon after dinner, Nita and Joyce were up in their room, getting ready to go for a walk in the village. Joyce produced a small gold box from its hiding place in the lining of one of her pockets. She opened it carefully and proceeded to powder her face. Nita did the same, but more blatantly and with "an air"; then, replacing her powder box in its carefully concealed pocket, she went towards the door. "Come on, Joy," she said.

"Wait a sec." Joyce answered, still busy with the powder.

"*Will* you come on?" Nita repeated; "buck up! I'm going down without you."

Joyce slipped her powder into her drawer and followed Nita downstairs. Nita, as Joyce well knew, could not endure to be kept waiting, but preferred to have people waiting for her. She was already on the last flight of stairs when Joyce caught her up.

They spent a satisfactory afternoon in the village and ventured into Billings, the confectioners, to buy sweets with a sixpence which Nita had not "given in" to Miss Western, but had kept hidden. It was the first time that Joyce had been into a shop in Laykington, and she was excited by it as well as rather apprehensive, as all shops were out of bounds to prevent the girls from buying things. Nita,

however, had been before, with Binnie. Joyce, feeling it most wrong that Nita should have been shopping before her, considering how long she had been at school, tried to look very professional while Nita purchased a quarter of a pound of toffee.

That evening, before supper, Joyce and Nita had joined some friends at a game of demon and were contributing to the general racket and gaiety when they were interrupted by a message from Miss Western. A girl came in and announced to Joyce that "Wuzzie West wants you."

"Help!" Joyce exclaimed; "what have I done now?"

"Oh, I expect she thinks you look tired, or wants you to be confirmed," said Binnie.

"Oh, stay and finish the game, Joy," said Nita, as Joyce got up to go.

"No, I'd better go and get it over," Joyce answered. "What a curse the woman is; I wish I could send down a message that I'm too busy to go to her just now!"

"You'll be able to deal with her all right, if it is some sort of row, won't you?" said Nita.

"I expect so," Joyce answered a little doubtfully. Then all the card players shouted "Good luck, old thing!" and Joyce went out of the room.

Even now she had a slight sick feeling. Not nearly as bad as the feeling she used to get, because things were much easier since she had got hardened to "jaws" and been initiated into Nita's tactics, but there, all the same. She went slowly, angry with herself for feeling anything unusual, and still wondering why she had been sent for. She thought, as one always does, of all the worst things that could have happened, and the most serious charges that could be brought against her, yet, strangely enough, she never hit on the right explanation. She reached the study door and knocked.

Miss Western was sitting at her writing-table on which stood an electric lamp, making a circle of light round her. She looked up as Joyce came in.

"Oh, yes, Joyce," she said slowly, and added, "shut the door and come over here."

It seemed to Joyce that her voice and attitude were menacing in the extreme. She shut the door and went over to the writing-table.

"Joyce, do you use face powder?"

The bomb had burst. Joyce collected her senses, with difficulty, from the debris.

"Yes," she said; "I do at home."

"I mean at school."

"Oh, no!" Joyce checked, just in time, an impulse to raise her hand to her face. Her expression betrayed nothing.

"Well," Miss Western went on in her deadly quiet tone; "it is a curious thing that a box of face powder has been found in one of your drawers. In fact it is worrying me a good deal; I hope you can prove yourself innocent of this very grave accusation."

Joyce hoped so too, but doubted it. She looked blank. "In my drawer?" she repeated.

"Yes."

"Are you sure it was my drawer?"

"My dear child, I am not likely to be mistaken in a matter of such importance. I have it here."

She held it out to Joyce, who took it. The lid was rather stiff, but Joyce, who knew how to humour it, opened it easily. Realising immediately afterwards that she had made a mistake she cursed herself for a fool, but the mischief was done. She looked at the powder aimlessly, then shut the box and handed it back without a word.

"Well?" said Miss Western.

Joyce moved from one foot to the other before answering. She wondered what Nita would have done in this appalling position. Was it any good trying to bluff? No, the evidence was too clear against her, but she must say something. What ever could she say? Suddenly she decided.

"It is mine," she said, "but I don't use it at school."

"Come round by the light."

"Oh, gosh!" said Joyce to herself. "Oh, heavens, I *hope* it's come off by now!"

It was just a question of luck whether it had come off or stayed on, and luck was against her that day.

Miss Western studied her closely. "What is the good," she said, "of all these lies?"

Joyce did not answer. Apparently they had been no good. "What a frightful business!" she thought.

"Well, Joyce, I will see you another time. You had better go and wash your face now."

Joyce did go, but not to wash her face. She rushed back to the sitting-room and burst in, pale-faced and wild looking.

Some of the card players looked up and Vivene called out: "Hullo! she didn't keep you long; what was it about?"

Their cheerful voices sounded terribly out of place to Joyce and she slipped round to where Nita sat and bent over her.

"My dear," she murmured, "something too ghastly for words has happened," and she rushed out of the room again without a word to anyone. Nita rose silently and followed her.

* * * * *

Up in their bedroom again they faced one another. Joyce had felt sick when she faced Miss Western, and to some

extent she had feared her. She did not feel sick now, but her heart was beating fast and hard, and she knew that from the beginning this was the moment that she had feared most. Miss Western could give her a pretty bad time if she chose, but only within limits, and anything Miss Western did would only make her a martyr in the eyes of her friends; but Nita—Nita could make her life a burden to her, and if there was one thing Nita despised more than another it was a bungle like this.

Joyce began to speak in a nervous, hurried tone.

"I went down there and the old hag was sitting scribbling like blazes, and when I went in she put on her beastly jawing voice and asked if I used powder." She paused and fidgeted with a toy dog on her dressing-table.

"Go on," said Nita.

"And so I said I did at home, and she said did I at school? and so of course I said no; and then she said they'd found my powder; so I tried to bluff a bit and went on trying to make out I hadn't any, and the woman produced it and asked if it was mine. So then I thought it was pretty hopeless, and I said it was, but I didn't use it at school. So then she hauled me over to the light and declared I'd got some on then; and I couldn't sort of say anything to that, so then she said she'd see me about it later or something, and I just cleared out."

Nita was silent for a moment. She was scraping the paint off her dressing-table with a pin.

"You fool!" she said at last, viciously, and gave a dig at the paint as if she wanted to hurt it; "you blasted fool!"

Joyce picked up the toy dog and sat it precariously on the pin-cushion.

"What else could I have done?" she asked, almost tremulously.

"Well; to begin with, if your powder had been properly hidden, they wouldn't have found it. Where was it?"

"It *was* properly hidden, it was in the—oh, no, it wasn't, I left it in my drawer because you were in such a hurry."

"Quite so," said Nita calmly. "Nobody but a born fool would have done that, and, another thing, it obviously wasn't any good trying to make out that you hadn't got it when she'd said they'd found it, and they'd obviously found it among your things—unless you wanted to make out that it was mine, of course."

"Oh, Nita——"

"Don't interrupt me. Then you ought to have thought of an excuse to explain it away—said it wasn't powder but special stuff for spots, or that your mother made you put it on to keep your face from getting mucked by the wind or something—that woman will swallow any old story—and then, what ever made you go in to her with powder on? I thought even you would have had the sense not to do that. Well, anyway, it's no good talking now; I suppose you think it's easy enough to think of these things afterwards, but I bet you the old bird wouldn't have caught me so easily. Well, another time use your brains a bit more. You're in a nasty mess and of course I'm frightfully sorry and all that, but it is your own fault."

Joyce turned away and gazed miserably out of the window. "Well, *you* needn't start jawing," she said; "I've had enough of that."

"All right, I've finished; you know I'll do anything I can for you, but I'm afraid at this stage that there's nothing much to be done."

Joyce still stood with bent head fumbling aimlessly with the little toy dog. Nita came over and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Cheer up, chicken," she said; "life is simply made of things like this, and if you never have any practice you never learn to dodge them."

The hand on Joyce's shoulder was slim and white, clearly a hand that had never had to work for its living, but it was surprisingly strong and Joyce seemed somewhat strengthened by its grip. Her hand became still and she lifted her head a fraction of an inch.

"Of course" Nita went on, "it's sickening to lose your powder, and it's rotten to be in this mess. But, after all, what can they do to you? Nothing so very terrible, can they?"

"No, I suppose not——" Joyce muttered. "Oh, I don't mind really, only—they won't write home, will they?"

"Write home?" repeated Nita. "No, why ever should they? Anyway, your mother wouldn't mind, would she?"

"I don't know."

"Heavens, mine wouldn't; she'd just be amused, but she'd take me away if the old hag insulted me."

"P'raps my mother wouldn't mind," said Joyce.

But Nita was following her own train of thought.

"That's where these hags are so wrong. They think that because we're young they can say what they like to us and we can't hit back. But I don't believe in being young, and I don't believe in not hitting back, either. It doesn't pay. Wait, if you like, wait ages and ages, but take it out of them some time."

Joyce wasn't listening, nor was Nita really speaking to her, but she was comforted by Nita's moral support and by her few words of encouragement.

* * * * *

Alix was sitting in her study in the throes of an essay that was not going well. Again and again she looked at a water-

colour sketch of her father's which hung above her desk, seeking inspiration. Again and again she ran her eyes over her little ornaments in the same search; a little bowl of orange glass, a cast of the head of Nefertiti, the beautiful Queen of Egypt, and a slender blue jar in which was a bunch of leaves of all the extravagant October shades. Also there was a small pencil drawing of a man's head in profile, a man with a short pointed beard and far-away looking eyes; under it was written "Adrian Romer," and smaller, in the corner, the word "Robin." But even in this she found no inspiration, and when her eyes returned at length to her book they brought no fresh thought for the development of the essay.

It was after supper on Sunday night and the essay had to be finished for Monday morning, but Alix had lost interest in it. There recurred to her mind a picture of Joyce as she had seen her in chapel "anything more like a wet rag—! what on earth is the matter with the child?" she wondered, and re-read the last paragraph of her essay.

Behind her Marjorie Seaton, another of the three occupants of the study, was sitting at her desk reading a novel.

Alix was fighting with another paragraph when the door was opened noisily and Anna Loyd-Evans burst in, from the study next door. She was big, with unruly red hair and a cheerful voice.

"Hullo," she said; "are you actually working? you energetic children!"

"No fear," Marjorie answered; "I disapprove of working on Sundays. Alix is, though; at least she's pretending to."

"Stop it, girl!" Anna exclaimed; "you'll get brain fever!"

"I know," Alix replied serenely, "the way I overwork is something awful. All the same, when you've got to finish an essay by to-morrow morning, and when you've hardly

begun it at 8.30 p.m. I think it's time to do a little work." And with that she returned to her essay.

"Oh, Marj.," said Anna; "did you take prep. for me on Friday?"

"Yes, six to seven."

"Well, I'll take yours this week then; when is it?"

"Tuesday, five to six."

"Right-oh. Oh, have you heard, that ass, Joyce Aylmer, has got caught with powder?"

"Oh Lord," said Marjorie. "Another row in the house!"

"I know. I really thought things were beginning to settle down now. There seem to have been such a lot of rows this term. That terrific fuss West kicked up about the house eating too much marmalade——"

"I *did* think that was silly," said Marjorie; "and then that awful business, those two idiots getting caught shopping, that was quite bad enough by itself!"

"You know, Joyce Aylmer *has* gone off a lot," said Marjorie; "she's so rude when you tell her to do anything, and she's getting vulgar too; the way she festoons her hair and everything."

"Yes, I know, and it's all Nita, of course. Joyce was rather a decent kid till she started going with her."

"Oh, Nita!" said Marjorie expressively.

"I know; ghastly child. Can't stick her."

"But she's not a child, that's just the worst of it. When you tell her to do anything she looks at you with a sort of 'run away and play' expression! She makes me feel like an infant in the lower school!"

"Oh, that's silly! You oughtn't to feel like that!" said Anna, "but I quite agree with you, she ought to be abolished. Joyce has got into a frightful row over this powder business apparently——"

"Naturally!"

"Yes, but it's worse than that, she told many millions of lies trying to get out of it, apparently, and West is frightfully cut up about it. Gillian told me about it" (Gillian was head girl); "she's pretty fed with Joyce. She says she's letting down the house and all the rest of it."

"I know."

"Joyce is having early bed every night this week, and all the rest of it, apparently."

"Good," said Marjorie heartlessly; "she needs something to pull her up. I hope it'll do her some good!"

"I hope it will. I wish they'd kick Nita out though; that would do more good than any amount of early beds."

"I know; but of course they can't, unless she does something really bad. I bet she's got powder too"

"Of course she has, and she'll have to own up now too, and that'll make a worse row."

"Not she!" said Marjorie.

"Oh, she'll have to."

"I bet you she won't."

"What do you bet me?"

"One perfectly good, unused, 'Victoria' lead pencil," Marjorie said, producing one from her desk.

"Right," said Anna.

"Do you remember when Jay and Jonkey got caught with powder? Ages ago, I mean."

"Oh, rather," said Anna; "when we were in the lower fifth. They did make a fuss over that; they searched all drawers and everything, do you remember?"

"Yes," said Marjorie. "I do hate having drawers searched. I hope they won't do that again."

"Well, they won't search ours, anyway. There is some good in being a pre.!"

They went on to discuss other school gossip, but Alix was no longer listening to them. She was thinking of Joyce. This really was the last straw. It was Nita, of course, all Nita. Joyce would never even have thought of it for herself. Oh, that girl! Why had she ever come?

The week passed slowly, but there was no very terrific row; it was a bad time for Joyce, but the worst of weeks will pass.

Marjorie won her bet. The only way in which the affair affected Nita was that she had to share her powder with Joyce, as soon as she regained her nerve, which happened after three days.

Every night, all that week, Joyce went to bed directly after supper, with many curses, "not loud, but deep." And every time that she met Miss Western she was greeted with a frigid look which said more plainly than any words, "you are the girl who let down the house, I am ashamed of you." Much the same happened when she encountered Gillian. It was all "disgusting" she thought, and "beastly unfair." After all, what was this frightful sin that she had committed? It was futile enough to be punished for using powder, seeing that practically everybody did it at home, but she, she felt, was being punished not so much for *using* it as for leaving it in her drawer. There was Nita, who used it more than she did, let alone and allowed to do what she liked, while Joyce—oh, dash it, what a beastly business life was!

Friends were very kind and sympathetic, but prefects and house staff were very cold and distant. By Thursday Joyce was nearing the end of her tether. She was angry with Miss Western and the staff, angry with the prefects, even angry with Nita—yes, and she was angry with her—or rather Nita's—friends for being sorry for her. She was at

war with the whole world of school and hated everyone in it.

She got more and more reckless as the week went on; she ran down the study passage in working hours, which was strictly forbidden. She did it successfully several times, managing to dodge round the corner and get away before a prefect came out, but once they were too quick for her. Gillian came out and called her back. "It would be Gillian," thought Joyce, "the one time I've got copped." Slowly and reluctantly she went back.

"Haven't you done enough this week," Gillian inquired coldly, "without getting any more bad marks? You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

Joyce glowered at her and went off again down the passage, cursing the school and everyone in it. She thought of Alix too, Alix was one of those blessed prefects—one of the enemy, leagued against her. Alix probably thought she had let down the house—just like the rest of them, dash them!

* * * * *

On Friday night Joyce went to bed alone for the sixth time, and in an even worse temper than before. She had been reported again, that morning, for talking in a lesson, and she was wondering what would happen to her to-morrow, Saturday, the day of reckoning.

She lay in bed with no hope of sleep for some hours yet and nothing to do but think. She had fits of tossing from side to side, rumpling up the bed-clothes, between which she lay quite still and gazed through the darkness at the ceiling, faintly lighted by some light outside. It was while she was lying still, meditating on the unfairness of human life, that she heard a knock on her door.

"Come in," she said in a voice of concentrated disgust,

Someone came. She came over and sat down on Joyce's bed. It was Alix.

"Hullo," said she.

"Hullo," said Joyce.

Then they were both silent. Joyce was determined not to help Alix in any possible way, whatever she had come for.

"Have they given you a very bad time?" Alix asked, after a moment's pause.

"They're a pack of fools," said Joyce irrelevantly, hoping Alix would pull her up for that.

"How long is this going on?" Alix ventured.

"What?"

"Early bed."

"Only to-morrow."

"Good."

Suddenly Joyce surprised herself by saying:

"I suppose you think I'm letting down the house and all that, like the others."

"Well, as a matter of fact," Alix answered, "I wasn't thinking of the house at all; I was thinking of you."

"Thanks, you needn't."

"I know I *needn't*, but I can't help it. I know it's not my business, of course, but I had to come. I was worried about you because I do care how you get on, and you've been unhappy, haven't you?"

Joyce didn't answer.

"I could see you were unhappy, and that was why I came. I know you hate everybody and think that they all hate you. It's only that some of the staff and prefects were annoyed about having another row in the house, that's all."

Joyce was softening rapidly. Alix's old charm was back upon her at that moment.

"Your own friends aren't angry with you, are they?" Alix went on.

"Nita is," said Joyce, in a burst of candour. It was such a blessed relief to have someone so understanding to talk to.

"*Nita!*" Alix repeated in amazement. "Why?"

"She thinks I'm such a fool to get caught."

"Oh."

"She was wild when I first told her."

"Was she? That was rather hard on you."

"Um, well, she can't bear people muffing things like that. I mean, she simply has no patience with that sort of thing, because, you know, she never does it herself."

"No," said Alix, "I suppose not. Joyce, are you happy with Nita? Are you happier with her than you were when you went with the others? Are you as happy?"

"Yes, of course."

"I wonder if you are," said Alix slowly; "because I never can feel that she is the right person for you, you know. I can't help feeling that you'd be happier really with someone who—who suited you better; someone more like yourself, or—I don't know. I don't feel she's right for you."

Joyce stared at her in silence.

"Joyce, couldn't you—isn't there anyone else? Don't you care for Laura and Bess any more? I don't mean quarrel with Nita, of course, only I wish you wouldn't cut yourself off from everybody else as you do. You miss so much and it's such a waste."

"You want me to give up Nita?" Joyce asked slowly, then broke out fiercely, "I never asked you to come here to jaw me. Go back to your beastly prefects. Who told you to make me give up Nita?"

"No one," Alix answered calmly. "In fact, I never suggested that you should."

"Oh, I dare say not; but that's what you want, isn't it? You'd be very glad if I dropped her altogether, wouldn't you?"

"Well, I can't say I should be sorry," Alix admitted; "you'd be happier in the end, or I'm very much mistaken."

"Yes, you *are* very much mistaken," Joyce answered vehemently, raising herself in bed. "I may be fickle, I may be a pretty middling rotter, but I *don't* give up my friends just to please a blasted prefect. Nita is the only real friend I've had since I've been here, and she's worth all the rest of the school put together. I don't care *who* likes me or doesn't like me, or *how* many rows I get into as long as I stick to her and she sticks to me. She wouldn't chuck *me*, she wouldn't go and leave *me* in the lurch, and she's sensible, and she's interesting, and she's the only person in the school that I care a straw about, so there. Give her up to please you, indeed! I'd rather be kicked out with her than stay without her."

"But, Joyce, do listen to reason, I——"

"You go to blazes, you and your reason," Joyce was sitting up in bed now, glaring through darkness. "I've got Nita and she's millions of times better than all your reasons."

"But, Joyce, I don't want you to chuck her, only not to go with her all the time, the way you do, and to see something of other people and enter into the school life more. I don't want——"

"You shut up," Joyce broke in angrily, "I shall go with her as much as I damn well please! I shall go with her every second I can. She's my only real friend I tell you; the only person here that matters to me the least bit. Go away; I never asked you to come here and say beastly things about my friends; go out of my room, now, go away, go away!"

Alix stood up. "But, Joyce——"

"Shut up. Go away. I hate you; I won't listen to you; get out of my room!" Joyce shouted.

Alix stood by Joyce's bed, distressed and puzzled, trying to think what she could say that might calm Joyce and restore, if possible, some measure of peace.

The sound of the door opening was followed by the sharp click of the electric switch and the room was full of light. Turning quickly, Alix saw Nita standing by the door, dark, slender, self-possessed; faintly surprised perhaps, or faintly amused; it was hard to say which, her face betrayed so little.

Nita nodded slightly to Alix, then crossed to her dressing-table and took up her hair-brush. Alix went quickly to the door. She cast one parting glance at Joyce, but Joyce was looking at Nita. She went out quietly and shut the door.

"Another jaw?" asked Nita pleasantly.

"M'm—Oh, I do hate that girl. Do you know what she's been saying?"

"Well, I wasn't listening at the key-hole!—but I can guess."

"She was trying to make me chuck you."

Nita laughed. "Yes," she said. "We never did quite hit it off, she and I."

* * * * *

Alone again in her study Alix sat quite still, her elbows on her desk and her chin in her hands; her eyes were on her picture, but she saw nothing. "Nita can't bear people muffing things like that; I mean, she simply has no patience with that sort of thing, because, you know, she never does it herself." Well, Alix had muffed this pretty thoroughly, she

told herself. Nita would not have made the mess of it that she had. She would never have a chance to get Joyce back now—never.

Some half-hour later she rose with a sigh, shut her desk, switched off the light and went to bed.

XV

IN this complete parting from Alix, Joyce had one pang and one only. Not that night, but some nights later, she awoke in the dark with an overpowering feeling that something terrible had happened, though for the moment she could not remember what it was, and to her amazement she found that her eyes were full of tears. She was angry at that; she had never cried since she had been at school, never for home sickness, never for a row, never in class, and, above all, never from politic reasons, as people in Lane's were said to do, to get off a row. But now, now, while she had been asleep, she had almost been betrayed into it, and all for no reason. At least for no reason she could think of, at least, not—then suddenly she knew what this sorrow was, this sense of trouble that was so like toothache, not very strong, but always there. It was all for Alix. Angrily, Joyce addressed herself, "Good heavens, girl, are you going melancholy mad? You jolly well dry up. You've done with Alix, do you see?" She put the thought of Alix most resolutely from her and took refuge in sleep. Next morning when she woke the sense of trouble had entirely gone and the sun was streaming in at the window.

"Nita." No answer. "*Nita!*" No answer. "NITA!"

"What do you want? Confound you."

"I say, let's have some fun this afternoon."

Nita turned over. "Why *this* afternoon?"

"Because it's Tuesday and we should be able to cut games."

"All right, but remember you are only just out of quarantine for your last row, so to speak."

"Oh, I shan't get copped again."

"Why not? You're silly enough for anything."

Joyce was stung by this reference to her recent failure to avoid a row.

"Are you afraid of getting caught then?" she asked, "because you needn't come if you don't want to."

"Is that meant to be funny?"

"No."

"Then I don't see the point of it."

"Well, look here, what shall we do?" said Joyce.

Nita stared meditatively across at Joyce's untidy curls, and Joyce stared back and thought that surely a girl who could rule her own hair as Nita could, could rule anything, anything from a friend to a kingdom.

"Well," said Nita presently, "suppose we go shopping; you want some more powder; have you any money?"

"I've half-a-crown sewed in the band of my hat."

"Good for you. And I've got ten bob."

"Good Lord, what ever for?" Joyce asked in amazement. "You'd get in the most *colossal* row if they found it."

"Well, they won't," Nita answered calmly; "and if they did they wouldn't make much more row than they would about half-a-crown. 'It's the principle of the thing that matters'—haven't you ever heard that before?"

"Oh, well. Where do you keep it?"

"Never mind."

"Good Lord, don't you *trust* me?"

"My dear," Nita answered, "there is no one I trust more."

The double meaning of this was entirely lost on Joyce.

"Why don't you tell me then?" she asked.

"Because," Nita answered in a tone of finality, "I don't choose."

They slipped off that afternoon, having ascertained that there were no staff taking games, and made for the village.

"I say," Joyce exclaimed suddenly, as they went, "isn't the High Street out of bounds now?"

"What difference does that make?" said Nita; "the shops would be, anyhow."

But they went by side streets as much as possible. On reaching the High Street they peered anxiously up and down, on the look-out for staff or prefects. To their horror they beheld Miss Wayland walking towards them, not ten yards away. Nita dragged Joyce down the side street again hastily.

"That woman's got her knife into me," she said, "we'd better not give her a chance!"

They stood behind a projecting shop window and waited for a time.

"You'd be in the devil of a mess if we got caught!" said Nita encouragingly.

When they ventured out again the coast was clear and they made their way to the chemist's and went in.

Nita rather frequented the chemist's, in fact, the young assistant was quite a friend of hers. "Hullo," she said breezily, "I want some powder."

The young assistant was all attention. "Yes, Miss," said he; "face powder?"

"Oh, no, gunpowder," Nita answered scathingly.

The young man grinned. "What kind did you want?" he enquired.

"Houbigon," said Nita, "rachel, quelques fleurs, plus box —they did keep the box, Joy, didn't they?"

"Trust them—beastly thieves."

"Thanks," said Nita, "that's the stuff."

"One and nine, please."

"Fork out, Joy." Joyce forked.

"I want some nail polish, too," said Nita.

"Oh, do buck up," Joyce interposed anxiously. "I'm afraid someone might come in. The Whale might turn up again."

"No, not like that," Nita was saying composedly; "haven't you any paste polish—the 'Cutex' stuff, you know."

"Yes, miss," answered the man; "something like this ——" he broke off short, gazing towards the window. "Some people from the school, I think, miss," he said hastily.

Nita took one look at the window. Outside were two hats unmistakably "from the school." "Quick," she said. "Hide us."

"This way, miss."

They got round behind the counter.

"Could you get underneath?" the assistant asked, a trifle apologetically, and in an instant they were crouching under the counter. They heard a click as the door opened, then footsteps crossing the shop, and a voice:

"I want a pocket comb, please."

"Yes, miss."

Joyce looked at Nita. "Gillian," she whispered very faintly. Nita nodded.

"One with a case," said Gillian. "Yes, that one will do. How much is it?"

"Eleven three, please."

The clink of money, then the crackle of paper as the young man did up the comb.

"And something else?" he enquired.

Gillian bought nothing else, but the other bought and

bought. Anna Loyd-Evans was with her, and she took so long in choosing everything that Joyce thought she would never get out from that counter alive, and it *was* so uncomfortable.

Anna was speaking again, " I may as well get a hot bottle while we're here," she was saying. " Can I see some rubber hot bottles, please? I don't want a very large one; quite a small one will do, but I want the squashy kind, and not too expensive."

" Oh, heavens," Joyce thought. " She's got to have the whole shop turned out to find a beastly bottle." A faint sigh escaped her.

Nita twitched one of the black trouser legs and made a face intended to suggest the words, " Do get them out of this quickly, somehow."

" I'm afraid we've nothing of that sort," the young man answered, almost gruffly.

Under the counter Nita winked at Joyce.

" But I saw some in the window," said Anna.

" I'm afraid we have no small inexpensive hot-water bottles, miss."

Joyce was seized with an overpowering desire to cough.

" Well, what is the smallest you have? " said Anna.

He showed her one.

" What about those red ones in the window," she said.

" Oh, they would come more expensive," he answered hastily.

Joyce felt that she was dying by inches in her efforts not to cough.

" Haven't you anything at all cheaper? " Anna asked.

The young man made numerous noises expressive of doubt and resentment, glanced through a bundle of hot bottles and shook his head.

" I'm afraid that's all we've got."

" Oh, I see," said Anna. " Well, I think that's all, isn't it, Gillian? "

They said, " good afternoon," and the young man said, " good afternoon," and they collected their purchases and went.

Joyce instantly gave vent to a series of shattering coughs. Then they both emerged from under the counter and stood up.

Nita turned her attention to the shopman first. " Thanks most frightfully, Archie," she said, " you are a brick, you've absolutely saved our lives! "

He gave an embarrassed snigger, put his head down and muttered, " Always glad to oblige; name of Brooks, miss, Harry Brooks."

" Oh, well," said Nita, " never mind, Archie will do very well. You'd like us to call you Archie, wouldn't you? "

Nita completed the purchase of nail polish and, after buying chocolates at the confectioner's, they started back towards school.

" You *are* priceless, Nita," Joyce remarked as they were leaving the village; " the way you talked to that boy in Begson's—I wanted to yell with laughter."

For a few minutes they both laughed. Then " Yes," said Nita, " that was a very near thing."

" If I'd been by myself," Joyce went on, " I should just have stood there and let them catch me! "

" I believe you," said Nita.

Shopping was one of the most exciting and enthralling games possible. Dodging the staff and prefects, who strolled in a lordly way from shop to shop, was a matter partly of luck but mostly of skill, and Nita was an adept at it. Once they went in quite a party, with Margaret and

Binnie and Vivene, but the other times Joyce and Nita went alone. Going in a party was more fun in some ways, but it increased the danger enormously, and Joyce for one greatly preferred to go alone with Nita, for in the presence of the other she was eclipsed so that nobody noticed her. After all, they were Nita's friends, not hers.

They always dropped in at Begson's, whether alone or in a party, to take a look at Archie and buy some little thing. The man who kept the confectioner's was also a friend of Nita's. Billings his name was, and he was stout and elderly, and commonly supposed to be bad tempered, but Joyce never saw him in that light; he was always most obliging when she and Nita called there. In fact it is probable that the idea had only arisen from his big bass voice and his imposing bulk, both of which frightened people. The man was a lamb when approached in the right way.

One Wednesday, finding games very slack, Nita and Joyce went off to shop. It was not till they reached the village that they remembered that it was early closing.

"We'll make Billy give us some chocs, anyhow," said Nita.

"Oh, do you think he will?" Joyce asked, "and then we can go down to the beach and eat them." Joyce was always wanting to go on the beach.

"No," said Nita, "that's too risky. Staff go there."

"No, it isn't; there's a place farther along where we bathed once; no one goes there, except village people occasionally. It's quite safe there."

They reached Billings's in safety. "Come on," said Nita. "We'll go to the house door."

She hammered loudly on the door which was opened presently by Mrs. Billings.

"Oh, good afternoon," said Nita; "I'm so sorry to trouble

you, but I wonder if you could possibly let us have some chocolates."

Mrs. Billings looked disapprovingly at them. "I'm afraid not, miss," she said, "the shop's shut, you see."

"Yes," Nita answered, in a tone of the deepest sympathy, "yes, I know; I thought perhaps just once in a way you might be able to oblige us."

"I'm afraid we can't let you have anything this afternoon, miss," Mrs. Billings answered, and added, falling back on her old excuse, "you see the shop's closed this afternoon."

"Oh, but Mrs. Billings," Nita began; then she saw Mr. Billings inside, and raised her voice. "Couldn't you possibly let us have some as a favour?"

On hearing Nita's voice Billings came to the door. "If you'll step into the shop, miss," he said, "I'll see what I can do."

He led the way through his parlour, which was full of red plush, cheap lace and china dogs, to the shop, where he sold them some chocolate.

"And can I do anything else for you this afternoon?" he enquired, rubbing his hands ingratiatingly.

"No, thanks," Nita answered, "not this afternoon." Then as he let them out into the street she added, "Thank you most awfully, Mr. Billings, you are a darling."

It was late November, but the afternoon was warm and sunny, so they made their way to the little cove where Joyce had bathed with Laura and José, more than two years before. They sat on a rock on the beach that was warm and white and covered with barnacles. Joyce would have liked to sit there all day, watching the waves, and the gulls that drifted out over the water, but Nita was bored.

"Let's go up to the top," she said, "and walk along the cliff path."

They climbed to the top of the cliffs and started walking along the cliff, and suddenly they met Archie from the chemist's.

"Hullo, Archie," said Nita, "have a choc?"

So he had one and he walked on with them a little way. It was now Joyce's turn to be bored. The path was rather narrow so that she constantly found herself walking behind the others and feeling rather left out of it. Also their conversation struck her as about the dullest and silliest that she had ever heard. How could Nita want to talk to a boy like that? How could the creature insist on walking with them. Suddenly Joyce felt quite disgusted by it. "I say, Nita," she called out, "hadn't we better be getting back?"

"No," said Nita, "not yet, it's only just after three."

"Well, I think I'd better, anyhow."

"All right," Nita answered, "don't mind us."

Joyce saw nothing funny in that, but the others went off n fits of laughter, so she supposed there must have been something.

About tea-time Nita turned up at school again. She seemed greatly pleased with herself and Joyce and life in general. But Joyce did not want to see her. Nita slapped her on the back and told her she was "a good girl," but Joyce said, "Oh, dry up," and went away. And in the evening she had nothing to say to Nita.

Joyce wondered vaguely if she was jealous of the chemist's assistant, but it was not really that. She was just "fed up" with Nita. Nita had treated her badly and had gone off with that greasy, vulgar little—ugh, the idea of it, what could they find to say to each other? What pleasure could it be for them to go for a walk together?

Joyce could not speak to Nita that night, and she could not speak to her next morning. Nita teased her, laughed at her,

made some effort to talk to her, and finally gave it up as a bad job.

Joyce did not exactly quarrel with her, but next day she went in search of Laura.

She found her in the changing room, after supper.

"Hullo," she said.

"Hullo," said Laura.

"Isn't life boring?" she said.

"Is it?" said Laura.

"Where's Bess?"

"Somewhere about. Where's Nita?"

"Don't know. Have you nearly finished greasing your 'crosse?"

"No."

"Well, do buck up with it and come and do something."

"What?"

"Oh, anything. Amuse me."

"Why don't you get Nita?"

"Oh, she's no good this evening. Come on, Laura, let's have some fun, stick away that old 'crosse and come for a walk somewhere."

"Where?"

"Oh, over to the school house or somewhere; let's go and climb in the gym."

"All right," said Laura. "I'll come in a minute, when I've finished greasing my 'crosse."

During the next few days Joyce took quite a lot of trouble to cultivate Laura and Bess, and it really seemed as though they might be prepared to take her back into their set.

But, oh, they were boring after Nita!

In the old days Joyce had got on very well with them. There had always been a slight gap that they did not fill, but now they seemed such miles away in all their interests

and occupations, in fact, in their whole life. They seemed so young, somehow, and so typically "schoolgirlish." And she had been taught to look down on that.

They had always been like that, of course, in fact, in the old days they had been if anything even more so; they had changed very little, but Joyce had grown older and had grown away from them.

"It's being with Nita," she thought. "She is so much older than them, and they aren't interested in anything sensible." She wanted to go back to Nita, but her pride restrained her. It would be admitting that she couldn't do without her, and that would never do.

Laura and Bess were entirely taken up with marks, with trying to get into higher sets for lacrosse, and with a row Bess had got into for losing some books. "Joan Arnold took them," said Bess. "I know she did, but I can't go and say that, can I?" And Laura agreed that she couldn't. From time to time Bess recounted all the circumstances, and when the conversation changed, as it did now and then, it changed, almost invariably, to a discussion as to whether Laura had any chance of "subbing" for the first twelve in the match on Saturday. After that, if the conversation should happen to languish at all, Bess would say again, "You know I didn't even take those beastly books down to the prep. room, or to the boot hole, or anything, so Joan must have *moved* them, anyway." And it would all begin again.

"Oh, dash the books!" thought Joyce. "What does it matter who took them?" She thought how Nita would laugh, if she told her about it, and say, "Yes, they're really healthy schoolgirls, that's what you ought to be like, my child." But of course Nita was interested in *sensible* things, and so was Joyce herself!

It did not last long. After three days of Laura and Bess,

Joyce could bear it no longer. There was Nita, every night silent and self-sufficient, there was Nita, every day going with whom she chose.

"She doesn't need me in the slightest," Joyce thought; "but I need her terribly. I don't know how I lived before she came." She never let herself remember Alix, even at times like this.

On the third night Joyce cast her pride to the winds and opened communications with Nita. Nita was very cold at first, she was even rather scathing, but Joyce bore it very well and continued to make advances. Next morning Nita and Joyce were as they had been before Wednesday, only more so.

It was when they were in bed on the following night that Nita said suddenly, "Joy, what are you doing next hols.?"

"Nothing," Joyce answered. "Just mucking about at home, I mean. Dancing once a blue moon, and so forth."

"I shall be in town," said Nita thoughtfully, "with my mother. Would you care to come up for a few days?"

Joyce was amazed, delighted, overcome. "Oh!" she said. "I should *adore* it!"

"Would your people let you?"

"Oh, they *would*, they'd *have* to!"

Nita laughed, "You'll come, then?" she said.

"I should *love* to, if they'll let me."

"Oh, well, you must make them let you."

Joyce fell asleep that night indescribably happy. Her dearest dream was to be fulfilled.

XVI

JOYCE was all alone in the London train. It was a wonderful feeling to her. She was growing up at last and was free to do what she liked, free to go to London all by herself! When she was quite small she had had a mental picture of childhood as a long struggle through a dense forest of underbrush, ending at last in a beautiful plain, where you could do what you liked, when childhood gave place to maturity. Now, at last she felt that the forest was thinning out, and she might even catch glimpses of daylight between the branches.

She watched the fields flash by with the thought that every field was nearer London than the one before. London! What fun she would have there with Nita, what wonderful fun! She looked at her watch. The train was due to arrive in twenty-eight minutes; in half an hour she would see Nita. Really see her in her home clothes and against her own background. What would Nita think of *her* clothes, she wondered. She would surely like her coat, the lovely new coat that she had only had a fortnight, and the hat, too, that would be all right. But she had had that green jumper suit well over a year, and what about her evening dress?

Twenty minutes, a quarter of an hour, ten minutes; slowly the time crept on, the fields had given place to rows of dismal-looking houses, interspersed with gasworks, hoardings and sidings and then, at last, the river, grey and gleaming, and then Victoria.

A warmth of excitement and expectation went through her as she seized her suit-case and followed her fellow passengers out on to the platform. In a moment she was one small figure in a great crowd, all moving on towards the barrier. She moved on with the rest, but her self-assurance was shaken. She felt so small and lost in this great crowd, and the ghastly thought came to her for the first time—supposing Nita were not there! What *should* she do? Or, even if she were, how was she to find her in this seething crowd?

She was through the barrier and wandering wildly among a mass of people all mixed up with trunks and porters. It was like a nightmare. Then in the middle of the nightmare she heard a familiar voice at her elbow :

" Hullo, Joy, where do you think you're going? "

An immense relief swept over her, and she turned quickly in search of Nita, but the nightmare was not yet over. A girl was standing beside her, a tall girl, very smart and dressed in black. For a moment Joyce gazed wildly about, then Nita laughed.

" Well," she said, " don't you know me? " and Joyce said:

" Oh, Nita! No, I didn't, just for a second."

As she followed Nita out of the station she kept her eyes intently fixed on her, partly so as not to lose her in the crowd, but also to gaze at her clothes. She had expected Nita to be smart, but she had never expected to know anyone who could look like *that*. Each item filled her with fresh delight, the little close-fitting black hat, the straight silky coat, lovely silk stockings and patent leather shoes with the highest of heels, oh, *far* higher than anything *she* had ever worn. So this was Nita, and what an air she had! How confidently she threaded her way through the crowd. Joyce was not the only person there who stared at her.

"Come on, Joy, quick!" Nita seized her by the arm and rushed her on to a bus that was just starting. "That was lucky," she said; "so often you have to wait for ages."

Joyce was silent, lost in wonder.

"Don't look like a lost lamb, Joy," said Nita. "You've been to town before, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes," Joyce answered quickly. "I've often been *through*, but never like this, sort of."

"Not to stay? Well, I hope you'll like it. Don't start by looking as if you were going to gaol!"

Then they arrived at the house. It was an immense relief to get out of the crowd and hurry, into its leisured silence. Nita took Joyce up to her room and they talked a little more while Joyce took off her things and tidied herself up. Also Nita showed her her own room, a masterpiece of personality.

"Now," said Nita, leading the way downstairs, "you must meet my mother."

Joyce was longing to, but she was very nervous. They went into the drawing room.

"This is Joyce, mother," said Nita, and Mrs. Russell turned to receive them. She smiled a little smile and said:

"Oh, yes, I hope you had a pleasant journey. We had better have tea now. Will you ring, Juanita?"

Mrs. Russell was tall and slim and her black hair was neatly waved and shingled, like Nita's. Her face was pale and passionless above a straight black afternoon dress. She wore little pearl ear-rings and a little pearl necklace; and she was very handsome. She and Nita did not strike Joyce as being very much alike, but on comparing their faces, feature by feature, she saw that they were. They had the same nose and forehead and almost the same chin, but Mrs. Russell's face was stiller, paler; she had not Nita's sparkle.

While they were having tea Nita said:

"I've booked seats for a show to-night, Joy," and Joyce said, "How lovely!" but, on the whole, they were rather silent. Mrs. Russell seemed to be far away, but Joyce fancied that she could talk very well when she took the trouble.

"Oh, Juanita," she said after a time. "Paul rang up this afternoon."

"Did he?" said Nita.

"He wanted you to go out somewhere on Thursday night."

"Oh, thanks."

"Will you ring, Juanita, if you've both finished?"

They spent the evening unpacking Joyce's things and looking over the house, until it was time to dress.

When, eventually, they went downstairs to dinner, Mrs. Russell was in the hall dressed in black and silver with a wonderful shawl, but she did not come in to the dining-room.

"Isn't your mother coming?" asked Joyce.

"No," said Nita, "she's going out to dinner somewhere."

Joyce could not help feeling greatly relieved.

"It will be more fun without her, don't you think?" Nita asked. "Just us two."

"Yes, rather."

Joyce enjoyed the theatre immensely, but she was very silent afterwards while they had refreshments in the dining-room.

"Well, Joy, how did you like it?" Nita asked.

"Er—oh, I simply adored it."

"Why, you're nearly asleep!" Nita exclaimed. "My dear, how pathetic! Come on, we'll go to bed if you're so sleepy."

Joyce went to sleep that night deeply thrilled by the noise

of the passing traffic and the thought of the splendid time that she had had and was going to have—in London.

The next morning they went out shopping. Joyce was still thrilled by the largeness of everything and the great crowds, and still felt a little lost and kept very close to Nita, especially when crossing a street. She thought it the most glorious fun wandering round the big shops, but tiring all the same. They went to buy Nita a hat and she insisted on turning out what, it seemed to Joyce, must have been the entire stock of the shop. She tried on and discarded endless numbers of hats which Joyce would have given anything to possess. At last she bought a little crimson hat at the ruinous price of four guineas.

"Mother will have to pay for that hat," Nita remarked while they were lunching. "I can't."

"Won't she mind?" Joyce enquired. "It cost such a lot."

"She won't have to," said Nita philosophically. "I've bought it now."

"What would you do," Joyce asked, "if she simply said she wouldn't pay?"

"Oh, I suppose I should have to get Paul to pay for it, but there's no chance of that; she'll pay all right."

"Who's Paul?"

"Oh, he's a cousin of mine. You'll meet him to-night. We're going to dance with him and another boy at The Royal; will that be all right for you?"

Joyce said it would, but she was tired after all the dashing about that they had done, so they spent the afternoon sitting about in the drawing-room, reading magazines.

That evening when they were dressed Nita went down first and Joyce, following a few minutes later, heard voices and laughter coming from the drawing-room and found Nita there with two young men.

"This is my friend, Joyce Aylmer," said Nita. "This is Paul, Joy, that you were asking about, and this is Denis Morrison."

Paul was dark with curious, long-shaped eyes that made Joyce want to keep looking at him. Denis was fair and much less striking. They went downstairs and got into Denis's car which was waiting for them, and soon arrived at The Royal. There they got out and Joyce followed Nita up the steps, and when they had taken off their cloaks they joined the boys again in a large, brilliantly lighted room. They settled themselves at one of the many tables which stood round the room and ordered dinner. Joyce, spell-bound, sat and watched the people who were already dancing in the middle of the room. At the thought of herself dancing there with them a sudden feeling of panic came over her. "I can't, I can't!" she thought, "I don't dance *nearly* well enough! Oh, I *can't*!" She spoke very little, but Nita talked incessantly so that it did not matter. Joyce had never heard her talk so much before.

When they had finished dinner Paul and Nita danced. Joyce watched them sail off and thought how beautifully Nita danced and her panic was increased a hundredfold.

"Shall we?" said Denis rising.

"I think I'd rather sit out," she said, "if you don't mind, that is." He sat down again and they remained in complete silence for some time. Joyce was nervously pleating folds in the tablecloth, with a feeling that even to look as if you were doing something was better than sitting quite silently doing nothing at all. At last Denis said:

"Do you live in London, Miss—er——"

"Aylmer."

"Aylmer."

"No, I live in Sussex."

"Oh, really," he said in a tone of profound unconcern. "I live in St. John's Wood," he added, after a pause.

"Oh," said Joyce. "I didn't know you lived in the country; I mean I thought you all lived in town."

"I do," he answered; "I mean it is in town—more or less."

Poor Joyce was covered with confusion. "Oh, of course," she said hastily, and after that they remained in silence until Nita and Paul came back at the end of the dance.

"Why didn't you dance?" Nita asked.

"I—I thought I'd rather not," murmured Joyce.

"Don't be a silly ass, Joy!" she said. The band struck up again and Nita went off with Denis. Joyce was already considerably afraid of Paul and saw them go with terror.

"Joyce?" he said, "shall we?"

She dared not even look up at him.

"I think I'd rather not," she murmured, her eyes fixed on the pleated tablecloth, "if you don't mind."

"But I *do* mind!" he said.

Joyce was horrorstruck.

"Come on; I'm sure you'd like to really."

"No, really——"

"Oh, now don't be silly! Why won't you dance?"

His tone was amused and infinitely reassuring. She ventured to look up at him.

"I'm afraid," she said with a burst of candour that amazed herself, "with all these people."

"Nonsense! Come on."

"But I *am*," Joyce protested.

"Oh, rubbish. They'll never notice you. I insist on your dancing."

Joyce felt she had met her match this time, and an

uncommonly nice feeling it was. She stood up very nervously and he put his arm round her and carried her off. His touch was reassuring and she danced much better than she had expected; just at first it was a little difficult, but once she got into it it seemed to her that she was dancing better than ever before. She looked up at Paul. He was looking down at her out of his funny dark eyes.

"Splendid!" he said. "Not frightened now, are you?"

"N-no!"

"That's right. I knew you'd like it once you got started. You were longing to all the time really, weren't you?"

"Was I?"

"Of course you were."

Joyce enjoyed the evening immensely and was taken home dog tired at 1.30; dog tired, but still awake enough to be terribly disappointed when she found herself next Denis in the car going home. Paul and Nita sat behind and conversed in low tones, but Joyce and Denis were as silent as the tomb.

Those few days were a wonderful time for Joyce, a "crowded hour of glorious life" indeed. She had never before lived so fully; they were doing something all the time, and something exciting too. But the days passed all too fast, as such days will, till very soon there was only one left.

"Just think," said Joyce, as Nita was doing her hair for her; "to-morrow night I shan't be here! Isn't it ghastly?"

"It is a pity."

"I have enjoyed it so frightfully much!"

"That's a good thing."

"It's been so topping having all this dancing," Joyce went on. "I'm sure it's made my dancing better already."

"Yes, you're not too bad really."

"I think I get on best with Paul. I got on awfully well with him last time—when was it? The day before yesterday?"

"Yes," said Nita; "he is a very good dancer."

"Yes, he is, and he *is* so nice too, I like him most awfully."

"You'd better not like him too much; remember you're going to-morrow."

"I probably shan't see him again, shall I?"

"Oh, yes, we're dancing somewhere to-night with him and another boy."

"Not Denis?"

"No, not Denis."

"Oh, I am glad I shall see him again before I go," Joyce exclaimed. "I think he's simply fascinating."

"Yes," said Nita, "that is rather his line; are you ready?"

They went down to breakfast. Outside the dining-room door Nita paused a moment.

"Joyce," she said, "be a bit careful with Paul. Don't let him have any games with you."

Joyce stared at her. She opened the dining-room door, then, and they went into breakfast.

That evening Joyce re-opened the subject when Nita came into her room to see if she was ready to go.

"Nita," she said; "what did you mean about Paul playing games with me, or whatever you said."

"I meant what I said," Nita answered. "I say, it's getting rather late, you'd better buck up."

* * * * *

When they got back that night Joyce was very silent. Nita watched her sitting by the table, flushed and bright-eyed,

eating biscuits. She was not sleepy that night, and, watching her, Nita knew that it was true, what Paul had told her. . . .

When Joyce was ready for bed she went into Nita's room. Nita, in pyjamas of flame-coloured silk, was sitting at her dressing-table brushing her hair. Joyce went and stood by the fire, first on one leg, then on the other, and finally dropped into Nita's arm-chair.

"I'm tired," she said. Nita put out the light and got into bed, but Joyce sat still, gazing into the fire. For some time neither spoke. "Oh, Nita," she said at last. "I have had a wonderful evening!"

Nita was silent and Joyce went on.

"Paul danced a lot with me, didn't he? I got on better with him than I did before. He *was* so nice; I think I —love him;" she paused a moment for this dramatic statement to take effect, but as Nita gave no sign of being affected she presently went on: "After we'd been dancing for a bit he took me out to a sort of balcony place; I don't quite know what it was, it was all dark, and suddenly he put his arms round me and kissed me. Oh, it was wonderful! It was like—I don't know what. It was wonderful, but I can't explain; you simply can't imagine what it was like!"

"Can't I?" said Nita, and smiled.

"Oh, you're not a bit thrilled!" Joyce exclaimed, a sharp note of disappointment in her voice. "Don't you understand, he *kissed* me!"

"I knew."

"You—what do you mean?"

"He told me."

"Paul told you that he'd kissed me?"

"Yes."

"Weren't you awfully surprised?"

"I was not."

"Oh," said Joyce, the disappointment back in her voice, "why weren't you?"

"He's always kissing somebody."

Joyce turned sharply towards her.

"What do you mean?" she shouted. "How do you know? Has he ever kissed you?"

"Ssh, don't shout the house down. Yes, of course he has, millions of times."

At that Joyce was silent for a long time, and when at last she spoke all the life had gone out of her voice.

"Then it meant nothing to him?"

"No."

"He was only 'having a game' with me?"

"Yes."

Very slowly Joyce got up and began to move towards the door.

"I warned you," Nita murmured, "but you wouldn't take my warning. I'm very sorry, Joy, but after all, you must begin somewhere, and I expect you'll get over it much sooner than you think."

Joyce neither listened nor answered. She paused a moment by the door as if uncertain what to do, then she said "Good night" in a very quiet little voice and went out.

She went back into her own room, shut the door, and stood for a long time holding on to the handle and gazing across the room at nothing. Then suddenly she had thrown herself on her bed and buried her face in the cool friendliness of the pillow, and, having soaked it in tears, she went, as suddenly, to sleep.

Next day she went home.

XVII

THE next time that Joyce saw Nita they were at Laykington Station. They had come down on the same train without knowing it, and encountered each other on the platform.

"Hullo, Joy" and "Hullo, Nita" they said. Then they began to talk.

"How ghastly coming back to this old hole again," said Nita, and Joyce agreed that it was so.

"Oh, these school clothes!" said Nita, "they are enough to kill you." And Joyce said that was just how she felt about hers. They walked up to school together, and went, first of all, to look at the plan of the bedrooms. In one of the single rooms was written "J. Russell" all alone, and in a three-room was "L. Acton, E. Fairfield, J. Aylmer." For a moment they both gazed in horrified silence, then they broke out and reviled the school, the staff, Miss Western, Matron, and everyone else they could think of who could possibly be supposed to have any hand in the arrangement of the bedrooms. After that they told each other what they thought of Laura and Bess and what a frightful time Joyce would have with them, but it was all to no purpose. They had to sleep in the rooms that had been given to them.

Joyce went along to the three-room. Laura and Bess were standing by the window talking. When she came in they stopped. "Hullo," said Joyce, and they said "Hullo," but nothing more. Joyce hastily put down her things and

left the room. She made her way up to Matron's room again, where a number of girls were standing round the table with thermometers in their mouths. Joyce submitted to having one put in hers with the feeling that she was humouring an absurd fancy, prevalent among school authorities. She looked at the girls standing round the table. Several of them were new, and almost all, to her mind, were stupid and dull, and not a really pretty one among them. At the thought of living with them solidly for two and a half months her heart failed her, but only for a moment because just then Nita came in. She received a thermometer and joined the end of the queue. To Joyce it was as though the sun had come out. Nita had her thermometer between two fingers and pretended to puff at it. Joyce laughed, some others laughed too, and looked prettier and less stupid.

"Now then," said Matron; "what's all this noise about? Nita, what are you doing over there? I can't have all this noise up here."

"No, no," Nita murmured soothingly. Fortunately Matron did not hear; she was a dragon in her anger.

Joyce did not need much insight to see that Laura and Bess were far from pleased at having her to sleep with them. They had expected a two-room, just as Joyce and Nita had, and they were very nearly as much annoyed at not getting it. They looked askance at Joyce and talked to each other all the time about things she did not understand. They seemed to have any amount of private jokes, and at night they used both to get into one bed and whisper and giggle for what seemed like hours, and always their whispers sounded like "ssJoysssJoysss." Joyce felt terribly de trop; also it kept her from going to sleep. She complained of it to Nita. Nita was most sympathetic. "I tell you what," she said; "you come along to me at night.

You'll have to get back to your room before second rounds, but we can have quite a long time together, and with any luck the others will have dried up by the time you get back."

"It would be terribly risky——" Joyce said slowly.

"Oh, it'll be all right," said Nita.

The next night Joyce got up when the lights were out, after first rounds, and crept along the corridor to Nita's room. It was rather a nerve-racking business and all the boards creaked in the most alarming way, but fortunately Nita's room was only five or six doors away from Joyce's. Joyce opened the door as quietly as possible, slipped off her dressing-gown and got into Nita's bed.

"How did you leave your little friends?" Nita asked.

"Oh, talking away as usual, all about 'you know who' and 'you know what.'"

"What did they say when you came away?"

"Oh, well, they asked where I was going, and I said I was going to pay a visit, and they said 'Who to?' and I said 'never mind,' and then Laura said 'Nita, I bet,' and Bess said 'don't go and get caught, anyway,' and I came away. Laura hates you."

"Nonsense. Laura hasn't got enough character to hate anyone properly."

"Well, she does her best."

"She does, but I could have that girl following me like a dog by the end of the term—if I chose."

"Not Laura you couldn't—Bess, perhaps."

"Oh, yes, I could."

"Do it, then!"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want to be dogged by an imbecile."

They talked until the distant closing of a door downstairs

warned them that second rounds were beginning. Joyce crept back along the corridor with cold bare feet and into her cold narrow bed.

About four weeks after the beginning of term a bottle of eau de Cologne was found in Joyce's room. That caused a minor row as scent was against the rules, but to have scent was not a deadly sin, and Joyce got off quite lightly. But it had a curious result. Joyce's form mistress, Miss Archer, seeing Joyce's name on the " early bed " list, asked her what she had done.

" Oh," said Joyce, " I had some eau de Cologne."

" Oh," said Miss Archer, looking thoughtful. That was all then, but in the afternoon when she met Joyce in the school house she asked her to go to tea with her next day. Joyce was rather surprised, also rather pleased; Miss Archer was decidedly popular and had always been a favourite of Joyce's.

She told Nita:

" I say, what do you think? Pen has asked me to tea to-morrow! "

Miss Archer was called " Pen " because there were a number of people who believed her name to be Penelope, but for no apparent reason, since it was, in fact, Rosalind.

" Has she? Who else is going? "

" I don't know. She didn't say."

" Perhaps she's going to have you all by yourself, to jaw you or something."

" Oh rather."

But when Joyce arrived at Miss Archer's room on Sunday afternoon she found no one there, except her hostess.

They had tea at once and Miss Archer skilfully kept the conversation going and kept Joyce supplied with very nice cakes, crumpets, éclairs, chocolate biscuits, and every luxury.

It occurred to Joyce that this was being a very successful party, although there was no one else there.

After tea they sat by the fire and talked for a little about one thing and another, and then suddenly Miss Archer said:

"Was there much of a fuss about that eau de Cologne you had?"

And Joyce thought it rather bad taste to refer to that at a tea party, but she was feeling tolerant after that tea.

"No," she said; "not a bad row."

"You've been in too many rows lately."

"That was the first this term."

"Well, there was a bad one last term, wasn't there? And there have been such lots of little things. Several mistresses have complained of the way you've been working this term, but I've not said anything to you before because I thought you'd settle down to it soon, but you haven't apparently. What's the matter with you?"

"Nothing."

"Well, personally, I think you're seeing too much of Nita Russell."

She paused for that to sink in. Joyce said nothing.

"I wish you wouldn't go about with her quite so much. She's as slack over her work as anyone I know, but she is naturally clever and you are not. If you don't take care, you know, you'll find yourself in the 'C' form next term."

Still Joyce said nothing.

"I could have you moved down now, only of course I don't want to if I can avoid it. But will you try to work better?"

"Oh—yes."

"And mind you keep it up, because you're going to have a shot at school certificate next term, aren't you?"

"I suppose so."

" And you'll have to work if you mean to pass it."

" Yes."

" I wish you could do with rather fewer rows, too, because they take your mind off your work so. Don't you think you could? "

" Oh, I—I suppose so."

" Well, do try. I'd like to see you do a bit better, because really it seems to me that you've been wasting your time here, you know."

To this Joyce made no reply. She couldn't very well say " yes " or " no," and she was not prepared to say more than that.

" Well," said Pen, " I expect you ought to be going. I hope you haven't had a very horrid afternoon."

" Oh—er—rather not, er—thanks awfully," said Joyce, backing swiftly out of the room.

Joyce thought for a little that she would try to work better, and try not to get into rows, but the more she tried the more of those " little things " there seemed to be. She really did work rather better for a week or so, but as to rows —it's all very well to make good resolutions, but it's not so easy to keep them; it generally isn't even easy to try.

Another and much worse thing happened before half-term. It was one day when Nita and Joyce were shopping, only the second time they had been shopping that term, and they had been to Billings' and were on their way back to school when, turning a corner rather too quickly, they ran straight into the arms of Alix and Marjorie.

In a flash Nita had hidden the parcels under her coat, but Alix was suspicious.

" Have you been shopping, Nita? " she asked point blank.

" No, Alix, I have not." The answer came smoothly.

" Have you, Joyce? " she went on, looking hard at Joyce.

"Yes," Joyce answered in a husky whisper.

"Pity," Alix commented. Then she and her companion went on.

Nita's hands were tightly clenched as they went on and the knuckles stood out white.

"Oh, confound you," she said, "you—you fool."

After that they walked on in silence for a time. As they left the village Nita spoke again, quite calmly this time.

"What did you do that for?"

"I don't know. It was the way she looked at me, as if she could read my thoughts."

"As if she could read your thoughts!" Nita repeated contemptuously; "Oh, you're mad! I suppose you realize that you've got us both into the most frightful row."

"I haven't got you into a row. I only said *I'd* been shopping."

"Oh, don't be silly. They saw me with you, and they knew you wouldn't go by yourself. You've let me in for it all right." They walked the rest of the way in a very strained silence.

They were sent for that evening, as they expected to be, by Miss Western. They were told that Alix had reported them, which they knew, and that the shops were out of bounds and that they knew it and that it was a terrible crime to break bounds, all of which they knew.

Then came the cross-examination—

"I am told that you, Nita, denied that you had been to the shops. Is that so?"

"Yes."

"But you, Joyce, admitted it?"

"Yes."

"I cannot help feeling, Nita, that you may not have been telling the truth. I am very sorry to think so because it is

a point on which I feel very strongly, and I have always regarded you as a very straightforward girl. I hope that you will be able to show me that you have been absolutely truthful."

"I hope so," said Nita, and that, at least, was true.

"Will you explain how it was that you and Joyce disagreed as to what you had been doing?"

"Well, Joyce and I went down to the village and Joyce wanted to buy something, so I said I would wait while she got it and then we would go back together."

"And you didn't go into any shop at all?"

"No, Miss Western."

"Well, I am very glad to hear it. I suppose you can vouch for the truth of what Nita says, Joyce?"

"Yes, Miss Western."

Miss Western then told Nita that she, being the elder of the two, ought to have exerted her influence over Joyce and made her behave better and that she did not consider her innocent in this affair and so on. Then she turned to Joyce and said all the usual things at great length.

Afterwards Nita said :

"Well, I managed that rather well. I didn't think I should be able to get off so easily. I'm sorry I couldn't do anything for you, but after all it was entirely your own fault."

Nita got off lightly, Joyce did not. Miss Archer looked at Joyce when she met her in the passage next day, but Joyce pretended not to see her.

Towards the end of the term Joyce had another row—three serious rows in a ten-week term is going rather far. She went along to Nita one night after first rounds as their custom was, and they began to talk. They talked for some time and noticed no warning noises until the doors began to

open and shut on their own corridor. It was too late then, of course, for Joyce to get back to her room.

"You must just get well down under the bedclothes," said Nita, "and I hope to goodness she won't notice your bed being empty."

So Joyce crouched down under the bedclothes and waited. She was not really much afraid of being caught as people doing second rounds hardly ever looked right into the rooms. But, as luck would have it, Nita had been lying down with a headache that very afternoon, and Matron, who was doing rounds, came into the room to see if she had got to sleep all right.

She was struck at once by the way in which Nita appeared to be filling the small bed almost to bursting.

"You don't look very comfortable," she said; "what's all this?" and she turned the clothes back a little to reveal a mop of red hair. For a moment she gazed at it in sheer amazement, and Joyce lay still as death, not sure whether she had been discovered or not, then Matron hauled her out and escorted her back to her room, breathing threatenings and slaughter.

Nita was implicated in that row too, but Joyce, of course, came off worse. Miss Western told her that this sort of thing could not go on, and something would have to be done about it, and that if you meant to stay at a school you must keep the rules of that school. She even went so far as to say that if Joyce didn't pull herself together and behave a good deal better she would really have to consider the advisability of asking her parents to take her away.

When she had finished with Joyce she sent for Nita.

"Sit down, dear," she said, when Nita came; "I want to talk to you."

Nita was completely unabashed by this most unpromising

opening. She sat down and arranged herself, with her eyes on the carpet, in an attitude intended to suggest dignity and politeness combined with a sense of "knowing her place."

It succeeded, at least as far as Miss Western was concerned.

"I have noticed," Miss Western began, with an air of quiet pride in her own observation, "I have noticed that you and Joyce Aylmer see a good deal of each other. Now I have been a good deal worried lately, in fact, for some time, by Joyce's behaviour. She has not been behaving at all well." ("Oh, get on with the washing," said Nita; mentally, of course.) I have been still more worried lately by *your* behaviour, Nita, I am afraid that you are letting yourself be led too much by Joyce." ("Are you, by Jove? You must be more of a fool than I thought!") "A few weeks ago I found that you had been hanging round the shops with her, and now she has been in your room, late at night. I see, of course, that in both these cases Joyce was much more to blame than you, which is what I should expect, but I am disappointed that you should let yourself be led like this. You really must not let her get you into trouble like this; in fact, I think that if you really exerted your influence a little more you might be able to prevent her from getting into trouble so often." ("My good woman, you've no idea how much 'trouble' I have kept her out of!") "You must assert yourself rather more, you know, if you continue to go with Joyce. You mustn't be weak and give in to her always, because I am sure that that is bad for you both. You will try, dear, won't you? Remember that you are older than Joyce, even though she has been at school longer. Do try to exert your influence over her. I am sure you could if you would only try."

"I will try," said Nita dutifully.

"That's right, try hard and keep on trying and you are

sure to succeed, and now I hope I shall have no more trouble with you or with Joyce either. That is all I wanted to say to you."

By the time Nita found Joyce she was laughing too much to be very coherent, but she managed somehow to tell her about her interview with Miss Western, and then they both laughed.

"She *does* love you!" said Joyce. "It's because you're so polite to her."

"If she was a little less of an idiot," Nita answered, "she wouldn't love me quite so much!"

"Well, dear," said Joyce, "I hope another time you won't let me lead you astray."

That night Joyce went, as usual, to Nita's room, after rounds, but they were careful to listen most intently for the first sound of second rounds beginning, and Joyce got back to her room quite safely.

As they lay in bed, talking, that night, Joyce said:

"I would love it if you could come and stay with me some time, Nita, but I'm afraid you'd be terribly bored, living in the country and everything. I couldn't give you nearly such a lovely time as you gave me, of course," and she sighed.

"Oh, rot," Nita answered; "I should love to come."

"Would you really?" Joyce asked eagerly. "When can you come then? Can you come next hols.?"

"M'm—let me see, yes, about the second week I think I could."

"Oh, splendid, then you will come, won't you? Don't go and get booked up or anything, will you?"

After that the term soon ended, without anything of importance happening.

XVIII

NITA came to Stonebridge. Dick and Joyce met her at the station with the two-seater. Of course, she was beautifully dressed, as Joyce had known she would be. She got out of the train looking radiant; she got into the car like a queen. Dick drove and Nita sat by him. Sitting behind in the dickey, Joyce watched them. She took good note of Nita's attractive little felt hat and tried to guess what such a hat might cost; she also watched her brother's face sometimes; his profile was turned to her nearly all the time, and every moment she thought he would drive them into the ditch.

They arrived home safely, however, and Nita was introduced to the rest of the family, except Mrs. Aylmer, who was away, and she was charming; charming to Joyce and her father, most charming to Alan and Dick.

After tea Joyce took Nita out to see the garden which was looking lovely, especially the orchard, white with the blossom of pear and plum and cherry, and full of daffodils. On their way back to the house they met the boys, who insisted on taking Nita to see the horses. They went round to the stable and took Nita to inspect each horse in turn, Samson, Rocket, Sunbeam, and Misty.

"Can you ride?" Dick asked.

"Oh, well—not so that you'd notice," answered Nita, and they laughed, and Alan said.

"Oh, we'll soon remedy that."

Next morning they rigged Nita out in an old pair of breeches of Joyce's, a pair of boots that Dick had grown out of some seven years before, and a jumper of her own. The most extraordinary thing about it was that she looked more like a fashion-plate than ever. "I believe," Joyce thought, "that if you gave her an old sack to dress in she'd give it a pull and a shake and look like 'Lady Somebody arriving at yesterday's Court'!"

They went out to the front of the house where the boys were waiting with the horses.

"Joyce has dressed me up in all the old clothes she could find!" said Nita.

"Are those *Joyce's* clothes?" said Dick. "You look like something from Bond Street."

"I feel like something from the rag bag," she answered with a laugh.

Joyce mounted Misty, of course, and her brothers helped Nita onto Sunbeam.

"She's rather big," said Dick, "but you'll find she's quite quiet. I generally ride her myself, so I know her."

"Thank you," Nita answered, "for the loan of her."

"I thought you'd better have her because Rocket is a bit funny sometimes."

Joyce noted that down on some mental tablet.

They spent most of the morning on the Downs. Nita took to riding like a duck to water, and looked splendid on horseback.

Once when Joyce and Alan were rather behind the other two Joyce said, "Isn't she extraordinary? Whatever she wears she looks like a queen or something!"

And Alan said, "So would you if you had a figure like a twentieth-century Venus."

But Joyce said, "No, it isn't only that; it's something to

do with being French, the way she puts things on, and all that."

Dick was teaching Nita to canter now. From time to time she swayed unsteadily in the saddle, but she never came right off. They came back to Joyce and Alan who were standing watching them. "Now," said Nita, "I will gallop."

"No," said Dick, holding on to her reins; "wait and gallop to-morrow. There's plenty of time."

"I may be dead by to-morrow," she answered; "I want to gallop now," and she broke away from Dick and raced off again.

"Now," said Alan, "Sunbeam will have it all her own way. That girl will never be able to hold her."

Nor was she. Dick went off in pursuit and the horses started racing. For some way Sunbeam held her own, then, just as Rocket was reaching her, Nita fell off, but she got up again after a minute and Dick went after the horse. Nita strolled along to meet him as he brought her back.

"Not hurt are you?" Dick asked as he helped her to mount.

"Good Lord, no!"

"You'd better be more careful this time," he suggested.

But she said, "Oh, no, I shan't be!" and she raced him back to the others. She couldn't stop, of course, when she reached them, and she very nearly ran into Samson, who tried to bolt, but Alan managed to hold him and catch Sunbeam, and Joyce managed to check Misty, who did bolt, and bring her back to the others, and so in the end they were all together once more.

"This brute does pull so," said Nita, "I can hardly hold her."

"You should try Samson!" said Alan. "But as a matter

of fact Sunbeam does go quite well, and I quite agree with you that you can't hold her."

It was nearly lunch time when they got home and Nita was so stiff that she could hardly stand and the boys had to support her into the house. In spite of this she was most enthusiastic about riding and said she would like to live on horseback.

They rode again the next day, all four together, and Nita declared that her stiffness had almost gone; and she was certainly very wiry and not easily tired except by things that bored her.

When they had been cantering on the Downs for a little Nita and Dick suddenly raced off to look at the view from a special point. Joyce and Alan cantered after them for some way and then got bored and started going back again.

"Since when has Dick been so enthusiastic about views?" Alan asked; but though Joyce looked intently at his face it told her nothing of his meaning.

The others did not catch them up till they were nearly home, but they had to forgive them for running off like that because Nita made them laugh so by telling them how she had tried to jump a gorse bush and had fallen off into the middle of it and got covered with prickles so that Dick had had to "pluck" her.

They all arrived home in great spirits and Nita found that she could almost walk into the house unassisted, also she no longer went about with one hand to her back, declaring that she had "caught lumbago from that horse."

It was a wonderful day. One of those summer days that arrive so surprisingly in April sometimes; it was therefore decided that Nita must be taken on the river.

They set out soon after lunch with their tea in a basket,

and ten minutes' quick walking brought them to the river and the landing place, where the boats were moored. They took their boat and started off up the river, Dick rowing. After much discussion as to suitable places they landed in a little wood some way up the river and had tea there on the river bank.

"I think," said Alan, after tea, "that it is our duty to protect the company from the ravages of midges," and he produced a pipe. "Don't you think so, Dick?"

"I suppose nobody has got a cigarette?" Nita suggested.

"Do you smoke?" asked Dick.

"Why not?" said Nita.

"Oh, well—Joyce never does, you know."

"Well, I do—when anyone is kind enough to offer me a cigarette."

Dick thereupon produced a packet and Nita took two and gave one to Joyce.

"You should acquire the habit," she said.

"Why?" Joyce asked.

"Because of the midges, of course."

After that they all tried to blow smoke rings, but Nita was the only one who could do it.

"Oh, you ought to learn to do that," she said; "it's a most useful and elegant accomplishment."

"Why useful?" asked Joyce.

"Oh, well, why elegant if it comes to that! Paul taught me that," she went on, "when I was quite a kid—only twelve or something."

"Did he?" said Joyce, in as bored a tone as she could muster.

Nita looked at her sideways. "That's the spirit," she said.

"Who is this Paul, anyway?" Dick enquired.

"Oh," said Nita, "he's a friend of mine and Joyce's."

"He's a friend of Nita's," Joyce explained, "and I danced with him when I went to stay with her."

"I call that a very mild way of putting it!" said Nita and laughed. "Oh, Dick, blow some smoke this way, I've finished my cigarette and the midges are mustering an army to attack me."

Joyce was grateful to her for changing the subject, though of course it was annoying of her to have mentioned it at all—Joyce had never mentioned Paul to her family—but that was just like Nita. She would tease you until you were just going to be really angry with her, and then turn round and be perfectly sweet.

It was grey twilight when they went down the river again. Nita was cold and had to be wrapped in Dick's coat. Joyce, fortunately, was quite warm, but in any case she would have known better than to expect either of the boys to lend his coat to a mere sister.

After dinner that night, when they were sitting round kicking their heels, "Couldn't we dance?" Nita suggested.

"Yes, rather!" Dick answered eagerly.

"We'll roll up the carpet in the drawing-room and go and dance there."

Accordingly they rolled up the drawing-room carpet and pushed the furniture away, leaving quite a fair-sized space to dance in.

Joyce went and unearthed an album of records. "What shall I put on?" she said—"'Waiting for the Moon'—will that do?"

"Yes, that'll do all right."

The needle hissed and the usual nasal voice began—

" Waiting for the moon
To shine
To show me the way
To get you to say
' I love you! ' "

Dick took Nita. " Good song! " she commented, and laughed.

Then Alan came over to Joyce. " By Jove," he said, looking at the others, " that girl can dance! "

Afterwards Nita showed them some new steps and practised them with Dick for some time. Later she gave Alan a turn, and so they went on dancing until at last Mr. Aylmer came and interrupted them, suggesting that they should go to bed.

" Oh, but you must come and dance just *one* dance! " said Nita; " Oh, do! "

So Joyce had the curious experience of seeing her father, *her* father, dancing with Nita! It was strange enough that he should be dancing at all, but dancing with Nita of all people—she never could have imagined such a thing.

After that one dance they shut up the gramophone and Mr. Aylmer went to bed. The others wandered out through the French windows, to get a breath of fresh air in the garden before following his example.

After a moment Alan went back into the drawing-room and began putting away the records.

" The moon is shining now," said Nita.

" Yes," Dick answered, " it's been shining all evening."

" I keep thinking of that silly song," she said, and hummed it.

" I suppose we'd better get this room straight," Alan called out from inside; " Come on, Dick."

But Dick took no notice.

Joyce went in and she and Alan put down the carpet and got the room tidy again.

"We ought to have some refreshments before we go to bed," said Joyce. "I'll get some biscuits and stuff."

She put out biscuits and a bottle of lemonade in the dining-room, then she came back.

"Oh, where are the others?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Alan, still busy with the furniture. Joyce went out through the French window and ran down the garden looking for them. Down to the orchard she went, and then she saw them. For a moment she stood quite still, staring, then silently she turned and fled. She felt guilty and excited, as though she had been eavesdropping and had learnt some vital secret—and she thought of Paul.

When she reached the veranda she paused for a moment to get her breath, then turned and called "Ni-ta, Ni-ta, Di-ick!"

She went back to the dining-room after that. Alan, who had finished putting the drawing-room straight, joined her in the dining-room and asked if the others were coming. She started eating biscuits in nervous haste, strewing the floor with crumbs.

"You mucker!" remarked Alan. "You want a plate —and a bib! Oh, Joyce!" he added, as she poured half a glass of lemonade down the front of her dress.

Soon the others came in, mysteriously shining. Dick was very silent, Nita talking loud and rather wildly.

"Hullo," she said, "have you got refreshments? What a rag. We've been out moon gazing. Dick was trying to teach me about the phases of the moon or something, but I'm afraid he found me a very bad pupil because I never can

understand that sort of thing, and I don't believe I understood it in the end, did I, Dick? Why didn't you come out too? It's such a lovely night!"

"I was working," Alan answered, "while that great slacker was boring you with his wisdom!"

"Oh," she said—"Oh, putting the room tidy, of course. We ought to have helped, I'm so sorry—Why didn't you help him, Dick?"

But Dick didn't answer and a silence fell on the room. Joyce wondered if Alan was on the scent; she thought he seemed to be looking rather hard at Nita, but after a moment he said:

"Well, I hope your schoolmaster didn't let you get cold, did he?"

"Oh," Nita answered with a queer laugh, "he wouldn't have noticed if I'd been frozen to death!—but fortunately I didn't quite die."

Joyce put away the biscuits and took the dirty glasses out to the scullery. As she came back she heard her brothers laughing and found Nita demonstrating some absurd kind of Charleston.

"Do you know the Argentine Tango?" she was saying, as Joyce came in; "it's a fine sight to see that properly done!" She did a few steps of it. Then, with a sudden air of weariness, she dropped back and stood leaning against the mantelpiece, gazing pensively into the fire.

"Oh," she said, "I'm so tired. Take me upstairs, someone!"

Joyce, looking at her standing there, more beautiful than ever with the glow of the firelight on her, thought how out of place she looked in those familiar surroundings, and yet she herself had brought her there. The room was so well known to her, so comfortingly homely, and Nita was the

sort of person that no one could know well, and certainly no one could be less suggestive of the word "homely."

Alan was standing by her now. "We'll take you up all right," he said. "Come on, Dick, you take her feet and I'll take her head!"

She let them pick her up, and she put her head back and looked at Alan and laughed, and he laughed too. Then she looked at Dick and laughed, and they all laughed together and went, still laughing, out into the hall.

"What a fuss they do make of her!" Joyce thought. "I'm the odd man out this time. Well, she's going away the day after to-morrow, and she's so beautiful, anyway; everyone has to make a fuss of her."

But even then, at the foot of the stairs, Nita changed her mind, and, having made them put her down, ran upstairs ahead of them, still laughing a little.

Joyce put the light out and followed the others upstairs.

In her room Joyce thought "Suppose she is just doing this for a rag—or perhaps to count up even; that *would* be beastly. He really seems to be a bit keen on her, and she shan't treat *my* brother like that. I must find out what she's up to. She can't come here and lead him on like this just to add one more to some blinking list. I suppose she'll be after Alan next then—but she shan't; I won't have it, I simply won't."

She went into Nita's room. Nita was lying on her bed in a crêpe de Chine petticoat, her dark eyes restless and exultant.

"Hullo, Joy darling!" she said. She sat up and stretched out a hand and Joyce went over to her. She drew Joyce down onto the bed beside her. "Oh, Joy," she said, "isn't it fun me being here?"

"Oh, rather," Joyce answered, a little undecidedly.

" It's so lovely," Nita went on, " riding and going on the river, and your lovely house and everything. I love all the world to-night. Oh, Joy, you are glad to have me, aren't you? "

" Course I am," said Joyce. " You know I am, only—Nita, are you—do you—like the boys? Do you like Dick? "

" Of course I do! " Nita answered happily. " I love them both, I love you, I love everybody."

" Which do you like best? " Joyce asked, still a little dubious.

" I tell you, I love them both! And, Oh! I'm going away the day after to-morrow, back to dirty old London, no horses, no river, no Joyce——! "

" But you've got plenty of friends in London."

" Not girls. Not another Joyce."

Who is impregnable to flattery?

" Oh, Nita darling," said Joyce, " have you got to go? "

" I'm afraid I have, damn it all. Never mind; we'll often stay with each other, won't we? I wish they'd let us sleep together at school though—silly old fossilized fools—but still, school isn't life. I suppose they thought they'd stop us going together, as if I wasn't stro—as if you were feeble enough to go with Laura & Co.! "

" I know! "

" We'll have such fun," Nita murmured, " after. Life only begins when you leave school. But we'll have fun now too."

" How long are you going to stay? " Joyce asked. " I suppose I shall be leaving in about a year."

" I? Oh, I'll stay till I get too bored, I suppose. We must both leave the same term though. When shall it be? We might stay till the summer after next if we liked it—but I don't expect we'll want to stay as long as that. You have

more fun when you've left. Besides, I should be eighteen and a half, and I think that's rather old. I don't believe in staying on and being head and everything, with millions of people keen on you and leaving in floods of tears—I'll leave that sort of thing to Laura—Oh, I should never do! I should corrupt my keenites, I'm sure! The school would go to the dogs, my dear, and I shouldn't even mind! "

" Darling, how you do talk! "

Nita laughed. " Why do we talk about school? " she said. " It doesn't matter; it isn't life; it's just dropping out of things, like being ill."

" Well, we've had a jolly good time at school, anyway and will till we leave, too."

" We must both leave at the same time, though."

" Oh, we must. I couldn't stay on after you; I simply couldn't. They'd have to let me leave."

" Oh, they'll let you when you want to," said Nita; " you can always refuse to go back if the worst comes to the worst. Oh, my dear, we'll have such jolly times when we've left school! "

" Yes, we will," Joyce agreed eagerly. " And we won't lose touch ever—not even when we are married."

" And when will you be married? "

" Ah," Joyce answered, " I don't know. When I find the right man."

Nita laughed. " You are so romantic," she said; " and I suppose you will settle down and have a family, wax fat and be a grandmother. Oh, my hat! and I shall be an old hag with an enamelled face, frequenting night clubs—no, I shall be dead and you will have forgotten all about me! "

" Oh, Nita, I shan't! "

" And when you see in the paper that I am being done in for shooting my fourth husband you will shake your head

and say 'Why did I waste the golden hours of my youth with her? I always knew she would come to a bad end.'"

They both laughed. Joyce said, "What a lurid picture! I am sure you will live to a blameless old age and die in your bed."

"I'm sure I shan't do anything of the sort."

They both laughed hilariously in spite of Nita's gloomy forecasts. It was twenty to two when Joyce went back to her own room and got to bed, and even then she had said none of the things she had meant to say—nor would she have said them if she had stayed till morning.

Next morning when they were out riding Joyce found some grounds for her worst fears. Nita was quite distinctly more with Alan than with anyone else. Certainly it *seemed* as though it were by accident, but—— There they went, cantering off side by side, Dick following. She followed herself, and the glory of it drove all thoughts of Nita from her head; but when they slowed down again she remembered. She wondered if she ought to tell Alan what she had seen the night before, but she thought "I should get no thanks from him, and Dick would be simply *wild* if he found out, and as for Nita——" That didn't bear thinking of. "But, anyway, it seems rather unfair somehow and—Oh! I *can't* tell him!"

She settled it so, but even then she was worried. Nita had no business to treat her brothers like this, it was rotten of her, she ought to see how rotten it was of her.

They cantered back to the road and started home. On the way Sunbeam cast a shoe, and Nita, of course, never noticed. Oddly enough, Alan did not notice either, but Dick did. Nita was most annoyed because they would not let her trot, she liked trotting and it was most becoming to her, but Dick told her flatly that she wasn't to. She tossed

her head and said she didn't see why not, and Alan tried to explain matters, but she either could not or would not understand him, and finally trotted off alone, just to show that she would have her own way. Dick trotted after her.

"Now then," he said, taking hold of her reins; "don't be silly, you can't make a lame horse trot."

"Can't I!" she said.

"No," said Dick, "you can't."

She looked at him for a minute, then she looked away and he let go of her reins. She rode the rest of the way home with Alan, but she got very little change out of him. Joyce was deeply relieved that she had not sworn outright at Dick or made a scene in the middle of the road. She doubted if *she* would have dared to stop Nita like that, even if it had been Misty instead of Sunbeam.

In the afternoon they decided to go down the river. Joyce and Alan were ready first and were waiting in the hall when Nita came downstairs in another enchanting frock, but Dick did not come. After they had shouted for him several times he appeared, still in riding things, and said he couldn't come because he had got to take Sunbeam over to the smith at Banfield as the Stonebridge smith was not functioning. It occurred to Joyce that Longley, their combined groom, gardener, and general handy-man, could perfectly have taken Sunbeam to the smith. But she knew better than to say so. If Dick had made up his mind not to come it was no good showing up his excuse; it would make him angry, but it would not make him come.

Joyce did not enjoy that afternoon. The others so obviously wished her anywhere but there, at least Nita did, and Alan, yes, even Alan seemed to have fallen. They made all sorts of most ingenious plans, which she most carefully thwarted, to get her out of the way, if only for a few

minutes. Alan got quite annoyed after a time, and Joyce knew well enough how Nita must be cursing inwardly and thinking her a tactless fool—that was the hardest thing of all, that Nita should think that of her.

When they got back Alan suggested that they should go into Seabourne in the evening and dance at the dance hall on "Seabourne's Wonder Pier." Dick at once said that he didn't want to be up late that night and would they mind going without him, but Nita said:

"Yes, we should mind very much. *Please* Dick, do come. We'll have such fun—and I'm going away to-morrow, you know. Please do; it will spoil it all if you don't come. So you will come, won't you, to please me?"

She said it with such a smile that Dick cheered up considerably and agreed to go with them.

During the first part of the evening Nita danced pretty evenly with the two brothers, but later she danced mostly with Alan, and once, while dancing with Dick, Joyce caught the crimson shimmer of her dress through the glass doors that led out onto the pier; it was moonlight again. When the dance ended Joyce led Dick to the doors suggesting that they should look for the others outside. They found Nita and Alan leaning on the railings looking at the sea.

"Hullo," said Joyce. "We couldn't think where you'd got to!" but she thought, "*What* a fool Nita must think me!"

"Oh," Nita answered coolly, "we just came out for a breather, it's so hot in there."

Joyce insisted on having the next dance with Alan, to make sure he came in, but it was not a great success. Alan was so obviously bored and wanting to get away; and Dick and Nita did not seem to be getting on very well together. Soon after that they had to go, and Joyce, for one, was not very sorry.

Next morning when they were going riding Dick declared that Sunbeam wouldn't go decently because she hadn't got used to her new shoe yet.

"How do you know?" said Alan, "you haven't tried her."

"I've tried her thousands of times before," Dick answered; "she never will go when she's got a new shoe; Nita had better ride Rocket; I expect she could manage him all right by now. I shan't come."

"Oh, don't be a fool!" said Alan. "Sunbeam's perfectly all right. It'll do her good to be taken out."

"No," said Dick, "I know her better than you do."

"Well, Alan," said Nita, mounting Rocket, "you'll have to catch me if I'm thrown," and Dick turned away and went into the house.

So Joyce was again left alone with Nita and Alan.

When they got back Dick came out and he and Joyce took the horses into the stable. Alan was going in with Nita when Dick shouted to him to come and help with the horses.

"Where's Longley?" Alan shouted back.

"Gone to Banfield."

"Joyce can help you, then."

"Joyce has gone in," Dick turned, frowning, to Joyce. "Go on, kid," he murmured, "out of the way, quick!" and she slipped out through a little side door just as Alan came in.

As she went she heard Dick's voice raised angrily, "Now look here, what do you mean by——" Joyce rushed into the house and straight up to Nita's room without even stopping to think. Nita was changing out of her riding things and Joyce threw herself into a chair and burst out:

"Now they are going to fight or something, and it's all your fault!"

Nita turned a puzzled face to her. "What *are* you talking about?" she asked.

"Oh, it's all your fault," Joyce repeated; "what *shall* I do?"

"Better leave them alone, I should think; you don't want to rush in and get a black eye, it would look so bad!"

Joyce turned on her. "You think you're awfully funny, don't you?" she said. "But look at the way you've treated them! Look at the way you've treated Dick! You horrible beastly cat, why did you come? Why did you come?"

"I came," Nita answered calmly, "because you invited me. As for Dick, I haven't hurt him in the least—nor Alan either, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, yes, you do!" said Joyce violently, "You've treated them both abominably, and this is the result. Oh, *do* go away. I never ought to have had you here. I might have known what would happen."

"Joyce, dear, what is the matter with you?" said Nita, sweetly.

Joyce sat and stared at the floor in silence, then leapt to her feet and dashed out of the room.

The extraordinary thing was that when they went down to lunch there were Alan and Dick apparently the best of friends. There also was Mrs. Aylmer who had arrived home that morning and was introduced to Nita forthwith. But neither of the boys took much notice of Nita throughout lunch, and afterwards, when Nita said she thought she had better pack, Mrs. Aylmer expressed her regret that she was going, but neither of the boys said anything.

Joyce went up to help Nita pack.

"Are you cross with me, Nita?" she asked after a long silence, and Nita answered:

"Not particularly."

"I'm sorry I said all that this morning," Joyce went on. "I don't know what was the matter quite, only I was all sort of worked up and funny. I don't know why I thought they were going to fight.—Nita, don't go on hating me!"

"My dear child, I don't hate you!"

"Oh, I wish you weren't going. Why did everything go wrong just at the end like this? We had such fun before, didn't we?"

"It's not horrid, Joy; I've had great fun all the time I've been here—I thought you had too. I'm sorry if I've bored or annoyed you—or whatever has happened."

"Oh, it's all right," said Joyce wearily. After a moment she spoke again. "You have enjoyed it, haven't you, Nita? and you *don't* hate me?"

"No, of course not. What a cheese you are, Joy."

When they had finished packing it was time for Nita to go, and she went to say good-bye to the family. Mrs. Aylmer was most kind and said how sorry she was to have been away all the time and asked Nita to come again some time; Mr. Aylmer was also very pleasant, but the boys kept rather in the background and said only what was necessary.

Alan drove them to the station. He sat there, with Nita beside him, looking straight ahead, and answered her remarks in monosyllables.

When they reached the station he carried Nita's suit-case in for her, found her a carriage, shook hands, and departed. Joyce stood on the step and talked to Nita until the guard came and removed her, and then she stood and waved before going out to the car again.

Alan did not seem to suffer any ill effects from Nita's visit, but Dick was not quite his usual self even when Joyce went back to school.

XIX

WHEN Joyce went back to school in the end of April she had completed her third year there. She was really getting towards the top of the school—she was even supposed to be taking school certificate that term. Nita, also, was back. Joyce felt it very strange to meet her again like this, deep in the school atmosphere once more. She still felt a little sore about Dick; but Dick and Nita's visit were equally far away now, and besides—she could never be angry with Nita for long.

They found themselves both in single rooms this term.

"Well," said Nita, "it's better than your being with these awful Lauras and people—one must be thankful for small mercies. Just think; they might have given me a dear little new girl to look after!"

"Oh, they couldn't," Joyce answered, laughing; "it would be cruelty to animals!"

"By Jove it would!" said Nita.

"This *will* be an awful term, you know. We're supposed to be taking certificate, and I don't know a single thing, and I haven't done a stroke of work all this year."

"Oh, Lord, you're not going to start *working*, are you? Personally, I don't mind in the least whether I pass or not. I think I shall probably leave this term, anyway. I'm getting rather fed up with school."

"But we said we'd both leave together!" Joyce exclaimed in dismay.

"Well, you must get your people to let you leave too."

"But I know they wouldn't; I'm not seventeen yet. They'd say I was too young."

"Oh, rot, you're nearly seventeen. I shall only be seventeen and a half myself."

"Anyway," Joyce went on, "I don't think I want to leave yet. You *might* stay a bit longer."

"I know I *might*," said Nita; and they left it at that.

This term Nita decided that she would like to be in the tennis six, and by dint of a little strenuous practising she managed to supplant Alix in it. She had always been good at tennis; she sent very hard shots, and her services, when they were not faults, were almost impossible to return. Joyce delighted in watching her play and took great pride in her achievements. The tennis six was chosen very early that term as there was a match on the third Saturday of term, and Nita played in the match, and played very well. But soon a diversion arose.

Joyce still kept up the habit of going into Nita's room after first rounds; and their rooms were next to each other now, which made it easier than before. One night, when they were talking in bed, Nita said:

"Oh, Joy, do you remember Kenneth Wills?"

"No," said Joyce, "I don't think I met him."

"Oh, perhaps you didn't. Well, anyway, he is staying at Lichley for three or four weeks, recuperating or something apparently, and he wants to come over and see me some time."

"My dear!" Joyce exclaimed. "You'll never hear the last of it if you have him up to school, and they won't let you go out with him."

Nita was silent for a little, then she said: "I don't see how they can stop me going out. It's not that I'm afraid of

being ragged, but there's nothing to do if he comes up to school."

"Well, what will you do if you go out with him?"

"Oh, he will have to amuse me somehow. I don't know what we shall do. One thing though; I think I'd better go over to Lichley if I do go out with him."

"To Lichley! You'll get in the most *frightful* row if anyone sees you there."

"I dare say; but I should get in very nearly as bad a row if they saw me in Laykington, and they'd be ever so much more likely to. Nobody goes to Lichley from here, except a few staff once in a blue moon, and the prefects aren't allowed to—and they're such a stodgy lot, they never do anything they're not allowed to."

"Oh, well, you know—prefects; I mean they can't very well break rules, that's the whole point of them!"

"I jolly well should, if I was one!"

"My dear, you never will be, so don't worry."

"Well," Nita continued, "I had a frightfully bright idea. I got some home clothes that I can wear to go out with him and people won't be so likely to recognize me. At least, it was Ken's idea as a matter of fact; but still, that will make it much safer and, after all, nothing's any fun without a bit of risk!"

"Well, but where will you change?"

"I can change my dress at school. I shall have to wear a school coat, but I've got a hat that will squash up. I'll change hats on the way somewhere."

Soon afterwards Nita announced that she was going out with Kenneth the next Saturday. She was to meet him at a place where the Lichley road went through a wood, just the other side of Laykington village. They arranged that Joyce should go as far as the wood with her, to help her to

do what changing would be necessary, and to see Kenneth, and see Nita off. Accordingly, on Saturday they set out soon after dinner and reached the wood about half-past two. Nita quickly took off her school stockings, revealing silk ones underneath, and changed her hat. They hid her discarded hat and stockings in a hollow tree so that she could put them on again on her way back. After that they waited, hiding in the wood, just beside the road.

After a few minutes a young man appeared, riding a motor bicycle, and Nita sprang into the road and stopped him. It was Kenneth Wills. She introduced him to Joyce and explained to him that they had better go to Lichley as she might be recognized in Laykington, and there would be "the devil to pay" if she were. Kenneth quite understood, but asked how she intended to get there.

"Oh," she said, "I'll go on that," indicating the bicycle.

"What?" Kenneth asked, "my pillion?"

"Yes."

"I say, will you really?"

"Of course; why ever shouldn't I?"

"You won't fall off or anything, will you?"

"Oh, Ken, what do you take me for?"

So they went, and Joyce watched them out of sight.

Nita got back about half-past six in a very hilarious mood. After she had changed into a school tunic she and Joyce walked round the field together and she recounted her adventures and shared with Joyce some chocolates which Kenneth had given her. He had also taken her to tea at "The Empress," the smartest and most *recherché* tea shop in Lichley; after which they had danced at a hall, and Kenneth had brought Nita back as far as the wood.

"And I'm going again next week and we are going to a matinée. Oh, it was such fun!"

" My dear, isn't there a tennis match next week? "

" No, there isn't," Nita answered, " and I shouldn't care if there were."

That was not strictly true, but true enough to show Joyce that tennis was on the wane already. But, after all, that was only natural; this other interest was so much more absorbing.

A few days later it was given out that two girls had been caught out of bounds, and that " if any such flagrant disregard of rules occurred again there would be no half holiday on the Saturday following."

" My hat," said Joyce, " it might have been you! "

" Oh, they're silly fools to get caught! " Nita answered scornfully. " Do you think it was just chance that it wasn't me? "

Nita went again the next Saturday, and Joyce went with her as far as the wood. She changed her stockings in the wood, as before, and then they heard the motor-bicycle and rushed out—Nita still with her shoes undone. It was Kenneth all right and he hailed them cheerily as they went down the bank to him. Nita did up her shoes, then stopped and looked round before putting on her hat. She turned back hastily, saying " There are people from school. Meet you just outside the wood, Ken."

Joyce looked round in horror, but saw no one. They both went into the wood hurriedly and made their way along inside.

" Who was it? " Joyce asked breathlessly.

" Laura and Bess, confound them."

" Oh, gosh!—now they'll go spreading some story, I suppose."

Nita was silent for a time as they walked on through the wood.

"Can't we coerce them somehow?" she said presently.

"How do you mean?"

"Can't we force them to keep quiet?"

"I don't see how we can."

"I suppose they don't still care about you at all, do they?"

"Oh, *no!*" Joyce answered confidently.

There was another silence, then Nita said:

"Well, we'll leave it at present, but if they do start some story I shall have to try to do something about it."

They came to the end of the wood and went out onto the road again. There they found Kenneth waiting, and he and Nita set off. Then Joyce walked slowly back to school. She had to be very careful not to meet anyone from school because no one ever went for walks alone and they would think it very queer, also they might ask awkward questions, so she went back slowly by unfrequented ways, and thought about Laura and Bess.

Laura and Bess did not lose a moment. They hated Nita and they had a grudge against Joyce, and they had the elements of a good story. They made the most of it. Nita had plenty of enemies and Joyce had no real friends, so they sowed their story in fertile ground. Even so, Nita heard nothing of it. Nobody cared to rag her for fear of the consequences, but Joyce was fair game.

After lunch on Monday, when Nita was changing for games in her leisurely way, Joyce burst into her room.

"They've been telling everybody," she began abruptly; "they were ragging me in form this morning."

Nita was gazing away out of the window. "Oh, bother!" she said. She had a surprisingly mild way of expressing herself at times.

After that, however, things died down and Joyce heard very little more about "the man on the motor-bike."

"What did you do about it?" she asked Nita.

"Oh, I couldn't do anything very definite," Nita answered, "but I did what I could. I went and talked to Laura. She's the one to go for, of course, the leader of the party. I told her if they went making these stories about us we would jolly soon think of some stories about them to spread about. She said we didn't know anything about them, and I said that didn't matter and they didn't know anything about us if it came to that. She said they did, because they'd seen us with a man; so I said I'd seen her with lots of men. I saw her, only the other day, getting a bucket or something from Armstrong outside the pantry door. She said that didn't count (isn't that just like her!) and I said I dare sayed it didn't, but it would make no end of a good story all the same. We talked like that for about twenty minutes I should think. She didn't like it a bit; she's really frightened of me, I believe. Silly fool! She seems to have shut up a bit, anyhow."

Joyce laughed and said:

"Yes, that was rather bright; but I can't see Laura eloping with Armstrong!"

"Oh, she needn't do that," said Nita, "I could easily see her kissing him—in my mind's eye."

"Oh, no, not Laura, she's so 'healthy'; it takes a *very* unhealthy type to do a thing like that!"

But Nita answered, "That doesn't matter; there are plenty of people here silly enough to believe anything I tell them."

Meanwhile, however, they had had something else, much more important, to think of. On the Saturday before, the day Laura had seen them with Kenneth, Nita had been to a matinée in Lichley and Kenneth had invited her to a sort of gala dance which was to take place in a fortnight. Nita

had come back full of it. The dance began at 8.30 at night, and she was already busy planning how she could slip away from school and go to it. "Ken's got a friend coming over for it," she said, "and he asked if I'd bring you. You're game, aren't you?"

Joyce said, "Oh, Lord, yes!" hardly thinking.

"It would be a pretty big risk, of course," Nita went on, "but I think it's worth it, don't you? If they caught us we should get kicked out all right—but they won't catch us."

This was an immense excitement hanging over them. Joyce was terrified and enchanted by the prospect, and by the thought that Nita and herself were probably the only girls in the school who would dare do it. But, of course, as she knew very well, she would not dream of doing it without Nita. "I don't believe," she thought, "that Nita would mind frightfully if she was sacked. Anyway, she wouldn't mind a quarter as much as I should, and her mother would hardly notice."

Joyce hastily got some clothes from home. She got Dick to send them, for fear her mother, if applied to, should ask what she wanted them for. She did not tell him what they were for either, being afraid that if he knew it was an idea of Nita's he might not send them, and in such an important matter she was not prepared to take any risks—except the great risk of doing it at all. Dick was only at home at the week-ends now as he was in town all the week, studying engineering; but he sent the clothes off next week-end, and Joyce, to her enormous relief, had a large parcel doled out to her on Monday morning, addressed in Dick's writing. For a wonder he had sent exactly what she had asked for; but she had given most minute directions about everything, so that was not perhaps as wonderful as it seemed.

And then there was still a whole week to wait. The

strain was awful. Joyce did next to no prep. that week, and hardly ever listened in class, the result being that she heard a lot about "putting her back into it" and was asked frequently what she thought her people had sent her to school for.

On Saturday morning she had a short but unpleasant interview with Miss Archer.

"You're down for returned work this afternoon, Joyce," she said; "French and maths., aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, I don't know what you think you're doing, but it doesn't seem to me that you're doing much work. You're taking the certificate this term, aren't you?"

"Yes."

"Well, how do you think you're going to pass if you get returned work at this stage of the proceedings?"

"I don't know."

"Nor do I."

And with that she passed on.

As Joyce had not been able to work during the week so much less was she able to on *the* day, and when there were only seven hours—six hours!

All the week Nita had been perfectly calm and collected; so cool and unemotional she was, she made Joyce think of some words, once heard, long forgotten, and only half remembered now—"My heart beneath your hand was—something or other—and quieter than a dead man on a bed." Where ever, she wondered, had she heard or read that? It must have been a long time ago, but it had a nice feeling about it and brought back, strangely, the smell of hay in summer. It was summer now, and it would soon be hay time, but this year she had not gathered handfuls of sorrel seed or walked through the fields with the long grass tickling her legs.

When she and Nita got out they always made a bee line for the village.

"Quieter than a dead man on a bed," that was how Nita was in view of this adventure, that is to say, she was even more calm than usual. How unlike her Joyce was! How she bit her nails (and she had meant them to be so nice for the dance) and how guilty she felt if any of the staff ever seemed to be looking at her particularly; how guilty for an offence not yet committed! She spoke stern words to herself:—"Now look here, my girl, you've jolly well got to pull yourself together, do you see?"—but it was no good, she continued to bite her nails and feel guilty—and to feel sick too, with the old sickness of fear.

Even at the last moment a great fear overcame her.

"Nita," she said, "don't you think—I mean, it is a most awful risk, isn't it?"

"Are you afraid?" Nita asked with the utmost contempt.

"Oh, no!" Joyce exclaimed hastily, "of course I'm not; all I mean is, it is a most terrific risk; and, well, it would be pretty ghastly if we got kicked out, wouldn't it?"

Nita was in no mood for answering questions. "Oh, well," she said, "if you're afraid you'd better stay at school and I'll go by myself. It'll be rather rotten on Kenneth, breaking up the party like that at the last minute, but I dare say they can collect another girl from somewhere."

"Oh, dry up," said Joyce. "I'm not going to funk it at the last minute. I'm no more afraid than you are."

"Then don't talk as if you were," said Nita curtly.

Nita and Joyce went up to bed, with everyone else except the prefects, at half-past eight.

"It will just be beginning now," said Nita. "It is a curse that we have to miss such a lot of it."

They did not undress, but just took off their tunics and

blouses and got into bed, having first put everything ready as much as possible. Joyce lay in bed, shivering with excitement, waiting for first rounds to come. They could not, of course, wait for second rounds, so they had decided to put a heap of clothes in the bed as a dummy, and hope for the best. The risk of being missed at second rounds was very slight indeed. At last Joyce heard the doors opening and shutting, and presently her own door opened and the head of the under-matron appeared for a moment, uttered the usual cheerful "Good night, Joyce," and vanished again. Now she was opening Nita's door. Now she had shut it and gone on. Soon afterwards Joyce heard her go back along the passage and downstairs.

For what seemed like several hours Joyce lay still and listened. At last she got up and began getting ready. It seemed so funny putting on an evening dress at school, so funny that she actually laughed! She was just doing her hair when she heard footsteps coming along the corridor towards her door. In an instant she had put the light out and scrambled into bed. The footsteps came on, right to her door and—passed! To Nita's door! No, past that too. To one of the bathrooms. Joyce breathed a sigh of relief. Faintly she could hear a sound of running water. Then the footsteps came back again, all along the corridor. How slowly they went! It must have been a prefect going to bed; there were two of them that slept at the end of the passage.

At last Joyce dared to get out of bed again and, very, very quietly, finished dressing. As she was putting on her hat she heard a soft tap on the wall and answered it with another. That meant that they were ready. Joyce took her shoes in her hand and opened the door with extreme care. The passage was very dark and silent and she shut her door very silently, and then, just as she was congratulating herself on

being so quiet, she stepped on a board which gave a loud squeak. She stood absolutely tense for a moment holding her breath. Then she looked about her and saw, straight in front of her, a person! Her heart gave a leap of terror, then she realized that it was only Nita. Very carefully they crept along the passage to the farthest bathroom. Without a word Nita opened the bathroom window and climbed down from it to the roof of the cloisters followed by Joyce. It had been Joyce's idea to get out that way. She and Bess had done it once for a rag, one Saturday afternoon in the summer —ages and ages ago. Joyce had little thought then how useful that piece of experience might one day be. On reaching the roof of the cloisters the next thing was to climb down by means of a drain pipe, a window sill, and some creeper. This was far from easy in the half-dark and when everything might depend on speed, but they managed it somehow. After that they put on their shoes and ran most of the way to the wood which was their rendezvous.

As they approached the place they saw two bright headlights glaring down the road at them. "Ken?" Nita called softly, and a voice from behind one of them answered "Hullo!"

There were two boys in the road on motor-bicycles. As Nita and Joyce came up they turned their bicycles round facing Lichley and Nita got on behind Kenneth, and then, without attempting to introduce Joyce to his friend, Kenneth started off. Joyce felt extremely awkward, left like this, alone in the dark with a man she had never even seen before. She went and got on behind him, however, feeling rather nervous and precariously perched, and wondering if the evening would really be all she had dreamed. Then, as she settled herself on his pillion, he spoke: "All right there, Joyce?"

Joyce was struck dumb at the sound of his voice. When at last she spoke the word came in a little gasp—" Paul! "

She heard him laugh and answer, " Of course, didn't you know me? "

Joyce was horrified, furious, ashamed, and yet—and yet when the question came into her mind " Would you have had it otherwise? " she would not face it, but answered herself, " Don't be so silly," and, mentally, changed the subject.

They raced along the smooth grey road, not very wide at first, but widening towards Lichley. The feeling of speed was thrilling and wonderful to Joyce, and the wind on their faces—— For some time they rushed on without speaking. At last Paul broke the silence:

" Enjoying yourself, Joyce? "

" Yes," she answered faintly; but added, " Quite," as a sop to her pride.

" Oh! " he said, " you'll enjoy yourself more than ' quite ' before you get home to-night."

" Home! "

" Well, school then. What would they do to you if they knew about this? "

" Sack us."

" Would they, by Jove? It was brave of you to come."

" Yes," she answered simply.

" Well," Paul continued reassuringly, " they won't ever know, so that's all right." Paul was so reassuring somehow. " And yet," Joyce thought, " I'm sure I ought to hate him, even be frightened of him—perhaps I am in a way—but, well, he *is* so reassuring! I'd thought I hated him; I'm sure I *did* hate him, but I don't seem to, now." All thought of the risk and the danger were quite put out of her head by the thought of Paul. Lights began to gather round them,

and buildings and people and noises. Anyone could see her now, but she was not afraid any more. Paul would look after her.

"Paul," she thought, "you'll take care of me, won't you? You won't let them catch me?" and was horrified to find that she had spoken it aloud—but only so softly, in all this noise he couldn't have heard—no, he hadn't. But even then he turned his head the least bit and she heard him saying: "Yes, my dear; I'll take care of you."

"I'm *not* your dear," she answered indignantly.

"I'm sorry," Paul answered; "I should have said 'yes, madam.'"

"It would have been better," she agreed, "but I didn't mean what I said anyway."

They stopped at last outside a huge hall. It was brilliantly lighted and the steps were all decorated with coloured lights and streamers. Paul took away the bicycles and the other three went in together, Joyce feeling very small and frightened. She and Nita went and took off their things, after which they went into the huge room that was full of a vast crowd of people dancing. Joyce felt smaller and more frightened than ever, and then, the last straw, Kenneth and Nita began to dance, and were lost in a moment in the crowd of swaying figures that moved round in bewildering brightness. Joyce felt like a baby that has been abandoned in the middle of Piccadilly Circus, quite hopeless and bewildered; and then, in the depth of her loneliness and terror, she felt an arm round her and there was Paul. In another moment they too were lost in the crowd of dancers.

Their careless gaiety was very infectious, and Joyce was no sooner dancing with them than she began to adapt herself to it. Her cold fear and loneliness vanished, and in their place was a glow of pleasure. Her body moved easily to the

music and responded to Paul's slightest movement. Under her breath she sang. On and on they danced, dance after dance, never speaking, but rejoicing in the rhythm and music and all the happy laughter round them.

The hall in which they danced had a very high ceiling, and was all decorated with balloons and streamers strung across from side to side above the dancers' heads, and from the ceiling hung six great lights.

Always, afterwards, when Joyce saw balloons and streamers slung across a great room like that, she was back with Paul at Lichley gala dance, dancing, dancing—just for a moment.

Paul and Joyce hardly saw the other two all evening, except at supper. All four had supper together, all most hilarious; Kenneth kept pressing them to have more of everything, and ordering all the most choice dishes—and champagne. Joyce had never tasted champagne before and did not like it much then—as far as she was capable of not liking anything on that wonderful night—but still, it was champagne! It would be something, even, to be able to say that she had tasted it. Nita, of course, was perfectly used to it, and so were the boys; but, to Joyce's relief, they were content with one bottle.

Being so excited Joyce found she could only eat a very little. It went to her heart to waste all the wonderful food, seeing that she would probably not get anything worth eating again before the end of July—but anything was better than feeling sick. They all shouted with laughter all through supper and made an enormous noise. Everything was amusing and everything was delightful. In fact, the whole evening was an absolute dream of bliss—and very like a dream in its complete detachment from the rest of life.

After supper their party separated into twos again. It was Nita and Kenneth who did the separating, but Joyce

was glad enough, by this time, to be left with Paul. They were so much alone, being together in that great crowd of complete strangers. It was splendid, she felt, to be alone like that; alone with Paul to take care of her. She would have been so frightened without him, and with him she was so happy—*so* happy!

Paul kept getting her balloons from among the decorations because she loved them so. She greeted each new one with shouts of joy (they were all different, and were so exciting), carried it for a little, as they danced, and then it got burst and Paul fetched her another. There was a careless extravagance about it that delighted her.

Once, looking down at her out of his funny dark eyes, he said:

"Aren't you enjoying it more than 'quite' now?"

"Yes," she answered breathlessly; and, after a pause, "Oh, yes." He smiled down at her; he was triumphant, irresistible.

Some time later they went back to the supper room and had refreshments. Even then they did not talk much. Once he murmured to the top of her head:

"I am glad to see you again, little Joyce!"

But Joyce said, "Oh, no, you're not; you never cared. I know you never cared!" longing for a denial, but he only laughed and said:

"You're very hard on me, Joyce; you're young to be so bitter," and she felt that he was teasing her, and said no more.

They went back to the hall and went on dancing. Once when they paused Joyce said, "Oh, it's good to be alive!" and Paul replied, "It's good to think so, at all events."

"Who's bitter now?" Joyce asked. But he only stared at her, until she grew afraid of him and turned away.

They danced and danced and Joyce's feet never got tired

and she never felt sleepy. It seemed as if there was a magic about the night so that nothing could go wrong. It seemed to Joyce such ages ago that she and Nita had climbed out of the window at school. She only thought of it once the whole evening, and it seemed, looking back on it, as though it had been in a former life. That was the only time she thought of school. She never worried about getting back or getting caught, or anything else, but lived completely in the present and enjoyed to the full every moment of it while it lasted.

The other dancers were a curiously mixed lot, but so happy that Joyce could not choose but love them all. They made such a noise and laughed so much and entered into everything so. It was splendid to be with them, to be one of them.

Joyce glided on in a mysterious, delightful dream, a dream in which there were only herself and Paul, against a background of people that were just "people." On and on to the rhythm of the music and the dancing feet, they were dancing so beautifully together now. Joyce had never danced so well before, and she remembered that she had always danced well with Paul. And then at last, though all too soon for Joyce, things began to stop. The band stopped and the dancing stopped and people began to go—but the dream went on still, for a little longer.

Nita and Joyce went, reluctantly, and put on their things again. It was all very queer. Putting on school coats on top of evening dresses was so obviously wrong, and the coat sleeves felt so funny against Joyce's bare arms. Also she was painfully conscious of being in a school coat when all the other girls had evening cloaks. Nita, of course, was in a school coat too, but hers did not look nearly so "schooly" somehow. Nita's clothes never did.

Kenneth and Paul were waiting for them outside and they started off again towards Laykington. The moon was shining brightly by now and everything was very strange and silent. The fields and hedges on either hand looked remote and ghostly, a constantly varying pattern of black and grey, with no colour anywhere. It was rather cold too, and there was a wind on their faces that kept them from getting sleepy.

At length they reached the wood, where they stopped and Nita and Joyce dismounted and took leave of their escort, and then, without losing a moment, they turned and ran. It made very little difference, since it was nearly two o'clock, whether they took ten minutes or half an hour to reach school, yet they ran all the way as though their lives depended on it. Partly they ran from a feeling that the sooner they were safe in bed again the better, partly from sheer exhilaration, for until the strain was completely relaxed they felt no shadow of tiredness.

They passed the main entrance to the school, for the great iron gates were shut and would, they knew, be locked. A little farther along they came to a gap in the hedge of the playing fields which was sometimes used, by the initiated, to supplement the more imposing gates. They squeezed through this and hurried towards the corner of the cloisters, keeping always in the shadow, when possible.

"Oh, it *has* been fun!" Joyce exclaimed, "hasn't it?"

"Yes," Nita answered. "I think it went very well. We must do it again while they are at Lichley."

"Did you know Paul was coming?"

"Yes, of course."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think you'd come if I did."

"No," said Joyce as they reached the cloisters, "I suppose I shouldn't have."

It was very difficult climbing up to the roof of the cloisters, a good deal more difficult than it had been climbing down, and Joyce had the worry of her evening dress all the time. It would be terrible if she were to tear that. But at last they were both up and found the bathroom window still open, mercifully. In a few minutes they were both in the bathroom without so much as a stocking laddered.

"Thank heavens it's Sunday to-morrow," said Joyce.

Ten minutes later she was asleep.

XX

THINGS had not gone so well as at first appeared. For one thing Lily, one of the school under-housemaids, who lived in Laykington village and came daily, had seen and recognized Nita and Joyce in Lichley. She had been to the festivities at Lichley with a "friend" of hers, and without any thought of making trouble, but merely as a matter of interest, she told Winnie, another under-housemaid, about it. Winnie, in the same spirit, repeated it to Ivy, and Ivy to Rose, and Rose, who was very chatty with the girls, told Laura, who was very chatty with the maids. After that it was not long before about half the house knew that Nita and Joyce had been seen in the early hours of Sunday morning, with two boys on two motor bicycles, in the streets of Lichley. "Good Lord, like servants!" The story was embellished in the telling, but the main facts remained true. Many people refused to believe such an extraordinarily unlikely story, but many, on the other hand, were ready to believe almost anything, particularly if it were to anyone's discredit. Nita and Joyce's enemies seized upon the story and spread it delightedly—and it was a good story. Such things did not happen every day.

On Monday morning it was given out at prayers that if two girls who had been seen to enter the school grounds at about two o'clock on Sunday morning did not give in their names to their housemistress before Saturday there would be no half-holiday or dancing on Saturday. A wave of surprise

and excitement passed through the hall, making itself seen and heard in little movements and murmurs. After prayers everybody was talking about it, and there were many who did not hesitate to say who the culprits had been.

" I suppose," said Joyce wearily, when she and Nita were alone, " I suppose we shall have to tell them it was us."

But Nita answered: " Don't be a fool! Don't you realize that if we tell them we shall stand a very good chance of being expelled; besides, if we tell them anything, it's ten to one the whole thing will come out."

On Saturday morning it was given out that as no names had been received there would be no half-holiday or dancing.

After that life became one long misery—for Joyce if not for Nita. Those who had not already heard Lily's story very soon did hear it. Joyce heard it several times. During Saturday morning she was exhorted on all sides to give up their very open secret, but Nita obstinately refused to let her do so, maintaining that the affair would blow over if left alone, and that if they gave their names up the whole story would probably leak out.

After that, except for the prefects who did not know, people would hardly speak to Joyce or Nita. Above all, nobody would be seen about with either of them. No one in her form would sit next to Joyce; even the people in other houses got to know very soon, and what friends she had had completely turned from her. No one had a friendly word or look for her; even Nita was in such a bad temper most of the time that she could hardly be called friendly. But Nita could stand up for herself, and almost everybody was afraid of her, which made things very much easier for her than they were for Joyce. Also she was much less sensitive than Joyce and cared very little what people thought of her. For Joyce it was one long agony.

Some of the worst times of all were meals on Sunday; for on Sunday people were allowed to sit with their friends for meals, and when one had no friends one had no place to sit. On reaching their usual table Joyce and Nita were told that there was no room for them; at which Nita flared up and said that if there was not room for her someone else must go, with the result that Binnie, the most kind-hearted of her associates, presently admitted that there was room—for one. So Joyce went round, alone, to all the tables in the dining-room saying: "Is there any room here?" and being answered always, "Sorry," in a tone which affirmed the contrary. And so, at last, when grace had been said, and Joyce alone was left standing, some prefect took pity on her and forced her table to make room for one. Then there ensued such a noise of everyone talking and laughing all round, yet no one spoke to Joyce, nor did she speak to anyone; she sat in a miserable silence, brooding alone. Even those people known as "scum" could afford now to laugh at her, and never failed to do so, hoping always to lessen their own unpopularity by siding vigorously with popular prejudice.

"This is frightful," said Joyce. "We must own up and have done with it."

But Nita said: "Don't be a fool, we should only get sacked."

A few days later, however, Nita showed a change in her feelings. "This has gone on long enough," she said. "I'm going to write to my mother and tell her she's got to take me away."

"But," exclaimed Joyce in dismay, "that'll pretty well prove you were one of the people!"

"Well, I shan't mind that, once I'm gone."

"I dare say not, but I shall. Besides, they'll know that if you were one I was obviously the other."

"I can't help that," said Nita. "You must get your people to take you away."

"But they wouldn't!"

"Well, you must *make* them, then."

"I couldn't. Oh, Nita, you *mustn't* go! I couldn't *stand* it without you!"

"Oh, rot. After I'm gone you can go and own up, as you're always pining to; and then your people will have to have you home whether they want to or not."

"Oh, no! That would be worse than anything. I don't know what they'd say—it would be *dreadful*!"

"What does it matter what they say?" said Nita angrily. "You're always worrying about what people will say and what they'll think, and saying you can't do things and you couldn't bear things—oh, you do sicken me."

Nita did write to her mother, but before she could get an answer a further development arose.

One evening when Joyce was in her bedroom—the only place where she felt safe from her enemies—looking miserably out of the window, Nita came in.

"Wuzzy West wants you," she said. "It's all up. They've found out somehow. Through that beastly little sneak of a maid I should think."

Nita seemed quite calm, but Joyce was thunderstruck. For a moment she said nothing. Then: "Oh, Lord! What *shall* I say?"

But for once Nita was at a loss. She either could not or would not think of any possible loophole.

"Oh, say what you like," she said. "It won't do any good, whatever you say."

"What did she say to you?"

'Nothing much. Just moaned and groaned about the house and all that, and passed me on to Whitty."

"*Whitty?*"

"Yes."

"Good Lord! What did she say?"

"Oh, she just gassed. She said they'd probably kick me out, and I said they needn't trouble because I was going anyway."

"Oh," said Joyce, hopelessly.

"Well, the old bird's waiting for you," Nita remarked; and turned on her heel.

"Nita!" Joyce called, desperately seeking some words of comfort; "wish me luck!"

But Nita was already half-way downstairs.

Joyce went down to Miss Western. She knew in advance how Miss Western would look and what tone of voice she would use. Terrible; but she wouldn't have minded it so much if she hadn't felt so lonely and without support of any kind.

Miss Western did look exactly as Joyce had known she would, and when she said, "Oh, yes, Joyce; I wanted to see you," it was in exactly the wounded and menacing tone that Joyce had expected—only more so.

She said that it had come to her knowledge that Joyce and Nita were the two girls who had been seen entering the school in the middle of the night, and Joyce, seeing that it was useless to deny it, admitted that it was so.

Then Miss Western said: "I have handed this matter over entirely to Miss Whitburn as any case as serious as this is naturally put into the hands of the head-mistress. I can only say how deeply disappointed I am in you and Nita both—though more particularly in you—and how I feel that you have completely let down your house. You have broken its rules and traditions and disobeyed its prefects for some time, and I have allowed you to remain here and continue

to do so because I hoped that it was only a silly phase and that you would soon pull yourself together and behave in a sensible manner; but you have gone too far now, and either you must leave this school or, if Miss Whitburn sees fit to give you another chance, which I think unlikely, you must make a very great alteration in your behaviour. That is all I have to say to you. I hope I shall not have to see you again. Miss Whitburn will see you now at her own house."

So Joyce went out of Miss Western's study and walked slowly and miserably along past Wood's, through the gym. and the school house, past the hall and Austin's and Lane's, until at last she reached Miss Whitburn's house at the extreme end of the school buildings. She went up to the door of Miss Whitburn's study and waited for a moment trying to pull herself together, then knocked. "Come in," came a voice from inside; and she went in, like a prisoner entering the condemned cell. The smell of the room took her back to that day three years ago when she and Laura and José had stood here together. But that had been nothing, there was no question of expulsion then. She stood just inside the door and waited. Miss Whitburn was sitting at her bureau writing, but when Joyce came in she laid down her pen and looked up.

"Oh, come over here, will you, Joyce," she said. Joyce went and stood by the desk. "I am terribly sorry about this business," Miss Whitburn said. "The whole thing has been a very great blow to me." And certainly, Joyce thought, she looked extremely depressed. "I don't know what you feel about it," she went on, "but I feel there must be something vitally wrong with a school where things like this can happen. What made you do it? Was it just a craving for excitement or what?"

"I don't know," Joyce answered guardedly.

"It's dreadful. It makes me feel that I am a failure as a head-mistress if I can't prevent this sort of thing from happening. You know, I feel that the whole school is to blame for this in a way. I am sure that if the spirit had been right, or, at any rate, if the spirit of your house had been, it just couldn't have happened."

"Oh, no!——" Joyce exclaimed deprecatingly. "I mean, it isn't anything to do with that; it was just us——"

Miss Whitburn shook her head. "There's something vitally wrong somewhere. Do you really think it's just you?"

Joyce wondered what on earth to say. Miss Whitburn obviously expected an answer. "Oh, I—yes," she said. "I mean, it was absolutely Ni—it was absolutely our own idea."

"Then you think that if I sent you away I should have got at the root of the matter?"

"Yes; it was just us," Joyce repeated.

"Well," said Miss Whitburn slowly; "I suppose that is what I shall have to do Seven years I have been head-mistress of Laykington, and I have only once had to expel anyone before, and I hate to have to do it now, but you certainly deserve it, and I don't quite see what else I can do."

Joyce said nothing, and Miss Whitburn sat and gazed at the paper before her, apparently lost in thought.

"Nita tells me her mother wishes to take her away, in any case."

"Yes."

"Miss Western thinks you have a bad influence over Nita. She thinks you have led her into all the trouble she has been in." She paused, but Joyce said nothing. "I asked Nita," she went on, "what she felt about it and she appeared to agree with Miss Western."

Joyce started and stared at her.

"To agree——" she murmured.

"She thought that you had rather led her on."

"Oh!" Joyce gasped.

"I haven't written to your mother yet, but I am afraid there is no way out. Have you anything else to say?"

But Joyce was not listening now. To her Miss Whitburn seemed only to be repeating her last sentence over and over—"She thought that you had rather led her on. She thought that you had rather led her on." For suddenly the truth had flashed upon her, and she saw, for the first time, the littleness of Nita's friendship. To Nita friendship was a convenience merely, and when it ceased to be so it ceased to exist. If she could have put the whole blame of this disaster on Joyce she would have done so without hesitating, caring little or nothing for the fact that it would lose her Joyce's friendship; caring only to save her own skin; and yet she was no coward. . . .

She was no coward. Even now Joyce knew that. But she was selfish, heartless, cruel—and Joyce had loved her. It was a shattering disillusionment to see what she now saw. She tried to turn from it; but wherever she looked it was there, and whatever she tried to think she still heard Miss Whitburn saying, "She thought you had led her on"—the liar!

"Have you anything else to say?" Miss Whitburn repeated.

"Oh," said Joyce hurriedly, "I—no."

"Well, I shall be seeing you again in any case. You will be going to the Sanatorium now, so you had better be getting ready to go over as soon as you get back to your house. Sister will be expecting you almost at once."

"Yes," said Joyce, making her way towards the door. Miss Whitburn went on writing.

Joyce ran all the way back and into her own house, upstairs, along the corridor, and so to Nita's room. She knocked with an unsteady hand and burst into the room without waiting for an answer. Nita was there, putting her things out ready to be packed.

"I've just heard from my mother," she said, without looking up. "She's coming to-morrow."

Joyce was checked. "That's very obliging of her," she said coldly.

"Yes," said Nita, "isn't it?"

There was a short silence, then Joyce broke out:

"Nita, did you tell Miss Whitburn that I led you on?"

"I did."

"You—you did?"

"Yes," Nita laughed. "What a fuss about nothing! It didn't do me much good, but I don't suppose it did you any harm."

"Oh," said Joyce, "I know you, I know you now! If you could have put the blame of the whole thing onto me you would have!" She meant that to sound very impressive, but somehow it did not seem to. "I thought you were my friend—I thought you'd stand by me—I thought—but I was a fool. You're just out for what you can get. I'm nothing to you, nothing, nothing! We said such nice things to each other——" She broke off, laughing rather wildly. "We thought we—meant them—at least I did—but it all meant nothing—and now life means nothing either!"

At that Nita laughed also, but Joyce was too wrought up to notice anything.

"You're going because you're sick of it. Aren't I sick of it, too? You're going to-morrow; but I've got to wait and wait while they pick me to pieces and shilly-shally over

it all! Oh, I can't bear it . . . why can't they kill me and have done with it? And you, after the way you've treated me—after it all being your fault—you just go calmly away while I wait and wait and get expelled!"

"This is very sudden," said Nita dryly.

"Yes, it is sudden. I've only just realized it all. Oh, I thought we were such friends, but you don't care what happens to *me*—all you care about is saving your own skin."

"'Every man for himself' is my motto," said Nita calmly.

"Yes, at the expense of every other man."

"If necessary, yes."

"I know now that you don't care a straw about me.—Everything you say proves it more—and you never did care either; never!"

"Oh, yes, I did," Nita answered bitterly. "Look at all the rows I got you out of. But you don't understand. I never do care for anyone; not what you'd call caring. It simply isn't in me—mercifully. I cared for you as much as I've ever cared for anyone—any girl. I cared for Kenneth a little; for Dick a very little; and for you, that night, more than I ever did before or since. I suppose this was bound to happen. But that dance was worth it; never think it wasn't. To have lived, even for only one night, was worth anything that these hags can do to you. Are you going to the San.?"

"Yes."

"We shan't see each other again, then?"

"No, I suppose not."

"Not ever, I suppose."

"Not ever, I hope."

Nita laughed again, but rather wearily.

"Oh, well; as I say, it was bound to come to this sooner or later." There was a silence.

"Well, you'd better be going then, hadn't you?"

"I suppose so," said Joyce; but she made no effort to move. What, she wondered, did people say at partings like this? Not just "good-bye" surely! She moved towards the door, then paused as her first anger came back on her. "I suppose you'll be *glad* never to hear of me again!"

"Well," said Nita coldly; "I shan't mind. You said yourself that you hoped never to see me again; and I can't say it hurt my feelings very deeply!"

"Oh," said Joyce, "I *said* so";—then, vehemently—"Oh, Nita! you're all kind of frozen and horrible now!"

"It is rather cold up here," said Nita with a queer little laugh. "Well," she added lightly, "I mustn't keep you if you're in a hurry. Good-bye."

For a moment Joyce stood in silence and gazed at her; then she tore open the door and rushed out, banging it behind her. She dashed into her own room still burning with anger against Nita, then suddenly, hopelessly, she covered her face with her hands and cried for a long, long time.

Some time later Joyce raised her face from the pillow. She was lying on the bed now where she had thrown herself what seemed hours before. It was getting dusk and the window was rattling forlornly; otherwise nothing, nothing, was changed. The ghastly situation was just as ghastly as before, and Joyce was just as lonely and miserable. Her tears had been a temporary relief, but tears mend nothing. It seemed so unfair, she felt, that she should be suffering now for a thing that she had done so long ago, and that she would undo again most willingly—if only it were possible. Again and again she had shut her eyes and tried to imagine that she had never gone to that fatal dance, nor ever seen Nita's falseness; but always when she opened her eyes again she was faced with the terrible reality.

" It does but double the heart ache,
When I wake, when I wake."

" What a frightful business life is," she thought. " Why was I ever born? Why can't I die now? They'd be sorry if I died! " She wasn't quite sure who she meant by " they," but she kept herself from being quite so unhappy, for a little, by telling herself how sorry " they " would be. Oh, if only she could die she would not only be out of it all, but she would also be revenged upon " them." " Of course," she thought, " from the point of view of school people I might as well be dead; only if I was really dead they'd be sorry, and as it is they'll probably be glad. People who go might just as well *be* dead. really, for all they matter to us afterwards. Leaving in an ordinary way is like dying of old age; and leaving like Nita is like rushing into the thick of a battle to get killed; being expelled is like, very like, being executed; and running away is suicide. How funny that it all fits in so well."

Presently it occurred to her that she had probably been expected at the San. some time ago, and there was no point in making more unpleasantness than necessary by going over late. She got up and washed her face very carefully and powdered her nose, partly from habit and partly because it needed it, but chiefly from spite against the authorities and to show, if only to herself, that she was not beaten yet. After that she went downstairs to fetch some things from the prep. room. It was very quiet downstairs; not a soul about; she wondered for a moment if they could all have gone to bed, and remembered that she had had no supper; but when she reached the prep. room she saw by the clock that it was only five past eight. After a minute of complete bewilderment she remembered that there was a singing practice in chapel because the singing was said to have been

so bad lately. That was a mercy, anyway, since it meant she could go where she liked without the risk of meeting anyone. It was strange to be wandering about the house like this with everything empty and silent. It gave her a feeling that she must be cutting something and would get in a row for it—but nothing like that mattered any more. Let Laura and Bess, Vivene and Binnie look to themselves and lie low when they were cutting anything; for her all that was over.

She went along to the changing room to get a pair of shoes. Just inside the door she stopped; there was someone there and she couldn't face anyone just now. Good heavens, it was Alix! How frightful! She must get away before she was seen—quick! But as she turned, a sudden gust of wind slammed the door behind her and Alix looked round. Joyce tried to open the door, but in her hurry she had forgotten that the handle turned the wrong way. Behind her Alix said:

"Joyce, don't go; Joyce——" She struggled feverishly with the door with a nightmarish sensation of being trapped.

"Oh, quick, quick!" she murmured, but in a moment Alix was beside her and had put one foot against the door.

"Here, get out of the light!" Joyce exclaimed rudely. "I'm in a hurry." But Alix did not move.

"What's going to happen?" she asked quietly.

"Oh, I'm going," said Joyce with a vicious stamp. "Can't you leave me alone?"

"Going?" Alix repeated slowly. "Do you mean you're going to be expelled?"

"M'm. Aren't you glad?"

"*Glad?* Joyce!"

"Take your foot away, woman! Oh, *will* you let me go?"

"No," Alix answered firmly. Then she went on:

"Joyce, how *could* you think I should be glad? If there was anything, *anything* that I could do, I would—Oh, Joyce, you *must* believe me!"

Joyce gazed at her with an expression of distrust and amazement, and said nothing.

"You think," Alix went on, "that because I'm a prefect I'm your enemy, but you're quite wrong."

"Everyone is my enemy."

"Everyone else may be, but I am not and never have been. Has Nita gone?"

"No. She's going to-morrow; she told them I led her on and it was all my fault—and now she's going to leave; not to be expelled, but to leave of her own free will. She's—she's—oh! she may go to hell for all I care!"

"I see," said Alix. "So it's come to that at last."

"Oh, don't start saying you warned me," said Joyce wearily. "I was fond of her. I couldn't help it. She fascinated me. She is so beautiful and she's terribly clever and frightfully amusing—and such a brute. She doesn't really care about anybody at all, she only pretends to; but she hates people, most people. I suppose she hates me now."

With every word Joyce's voice rose higher and grew wilder. "She just *used* me, that was all. As long as I was any use to her she was my friend, and now she's betrayed and deserted me and behaved as if it was all my fault. And I did —like her—so awfully—once—but now—now . . ." She broke down, and, sinking on the lockers, covered her face with her hands.

Alix came and stood by her in silence. Presently she spoke, but almost in a whisper.

"Joyce, don't—don't.—Joyce, listen. It had to happen some time and you're well rid of her, truly, truly!"

"Oh——" Joyce moaned. "I can't . . . bear it."

"Joyce! Pull yourself together. You've got to bear it. You *must*."

"I don't know why—you—bother—about me," said Joyce. "Look at the way—I've treated you. As long as I was her friend I couldn't have anything to do with you. You were such opposites; and she was so jealous. But she fascinated me; it wasn't my fault, Alix, it wasn't my fault!"

"You were so weak," said Alix. "You were like clay in her hands. Poor Joyce; poor child; she did what she liked with you. I know it was all her fault, but still, you're quit of her now, and you ought to be glad; whatever you have to go through, you ought to be glad she's gone and left you free."

"Gone," Joyce repeated; "and left me like *this*. I wish she'd killed me while she was about it."

"Oh, Joyce, don't be maudlin. You know you don't mean that. You know there's heaps to live for yet."

"Is there?"

"Of course there is. When you get home everything will clear up quite soon, and your people will be sorry for you and try to make everything nice——"

"No," said Joyce hopelessly; "they'll be furious and horrible—that's what I dread most of anything."

"Oh, nonsense. Anyway, perhaps you won't go after all."

"What do you mean?"

"Perhaps you won't be expelled."

"What's to stop me?"

"Did Miss Whitburn say it was absolutely settled?"

"No."

"Well, there you are."

"But it is."

"You never know. Are you going to the San. now?"

"Yes."

"Then I suppose you'd better go, but for heaven's sake don't let yourself get all hopeless again."

"I'll try not to," Joyce took up her shoes and went. Went upstairs to start that dismal business of packing.

Slowly but carelessly she packed the few things she would need for a day or two at the San. Somebody else would pack the rest of her things; she would never enter that room again. It had always been so exciting before, packing at school—Oh, what fun it used to be! Everybody was so thrilled and happy and going home the next day. How they used to rejoice in the dormitories when they found their trunks under their beds! It would be very different this time, going home. Anyway, the actual packing would be spared her.

She took up her suit-case and went downstairs, put on her hat and coat and went out by the back door.

"I shall never come out this way again," she thought. "This isn't how I meant to finish it, but there's nothing to stay for now—nothing except Alix. If they don't want me I don't want them."

She walked slowly over to the San. and was told by sister where she was to sleep. Then she went and found the little bare whitewashed room smelling horribly of disinfectant. She undressed slowly and got into the clean cold bed, and all the time she was under a heavy cloud of depression, so she tried to think of Alix. But what comfort was there to be got out of that when the thought of Alix necessarily brought with it the thought that she would very likely never see her again? "Perhaps you won't go after all," Alix had said. But what did that mean? Nothing, and less than nothing. A chance phrase, founded on some passing thought of one

who knew hardly anything of the circumstances. There was little hope to be got out of that. It was something indeed for Joyce to be able to feel that she had one friend in the world. In a way it was a great thing; but it was not very cheering for her to think that she had just parted from her only friend, probably for ever. And, after all, how could they meet again? Joyce would never dare, after the way she had treated her, to ask Alix to stay at Stonebridge, and Alix had nowhere to ask Joyce to stay, even if she had wished to, and Joyce, of course, could never come back to Laykington. If they did meet again it would be by the merest chance—just as it would if Joyce and Nita should meet.

"Anything would be better than this perpetual thinking," Joyce thought, already sick of being alone with herself. "Why can't I just stop thinking altogether?"

She slept fitfully and had horrible dreams, and for long stretches she lay awake in the darkness, thinking and thinking. She thought of all the nice times she had had with Alix and of how badly she had treated her. She thought how she had wasted all that time going with Nita when she might have been spending it in getting to know Alix. She thought how abominably Nita had treated her, how horrible everyone was and how angry her people would be. In her dreams she was generally being chased by a gorilla or a lunatic or Miss Western, and sometimes Nita would come and run beside her, and sometimes she would join with the others in chasing her. Then there were great doors that Joyce could not open, and a very heavy suit-case that she kept dropping; and sometimes her father or mother would join with her pursuers and she could not lift her feet, and they gained and gained——

But her thoughts were worse than her dreams, because her dreams did stop sometimes and did change sometimes, but her

thoughts never stopped or changed and the situation never stopped or changed. How she wished, during that long night, that everything would suddenly stop, and, if it must begin again, begin quite differently.

Next day Joyce was left to herself all the morning and afternoon, and in the evening she was told, to her surprise, to collect her things and go back to school again, back to her old room. When she arrived at school everybody was, mercifully, in prep.; so that she was able to slip through the house unobserved and settle down in her room to wait for something to happen. After she had waited for nearly an hour, and was beginning to wonder if she had really been meant to go up to her room without letting anyone know, there came a knock at her door.

"Come in," said Joyce.

It was Ivy, one of the housemaids.

"Please, miss," she said, "will you go over to Miss Whitburn's house now? Miss Whitburn wants to see you."

"Good Lord," said Joyce, "what for?"

"I don't know, miss."

"Oh, well—thank you."

She was glad they had chosen Ivy to send to her; she was almost the only polite maid in the house.

Joyce went over to Miss Whitburn's house and into the study.

"Well, Joyce," said Miss Whitburn; "I want to ask you a few questions. Will you sit down?" Joyce sat

"This idea of going out at night——" she went on slowly, "whose idea was it?"

"Oh, well——" said Joyce, "well, as a matter of fact it was more or less Nita's idea."

"More or less?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean that it was or was not?"

"Well, I suppose it was."

"You were found to be using face powder a term or two ago, weren't you?"

"Yes," Joyce answered, very ill at ease. What fresh horror was this heralding?

"Was that Nita's idea too?"

"Yes, having it at school was."

"And what about the time that you were found to have been buying things in the shops in Laykington, was that Nita's idea too?"

"Yes." Nothing she said, she reflected, could hurt Nita now—and anyway, she was only doing what Nita would have done, except that what she was saying was true.

"Then it was Nita who took the lead in most things?"

"I suppose so."

"I gather you behaved much better before she came."

Joyce did not answer.

"This last affair; it was all her doing, I suppose? You just agreed to her suggestions and went with her?"

"Yes—I suppose so."

"Then perhaps all that was necessary was for Nita to go; perhaps now that she has gone everything will be all right."

Joyce said nothing.

"Do you think that is so?"

"I—I don't know."

"But what do you think?"

"Yes," said Joyce, with an effort, "I think so."

"Even if you stay?"

"Yes."

"Well; as a matter of fact—I think so too."

Joyce was silent. She felt that her fate was in the balance and waited tensely.

"If I let you stay," Miss Whitburn's quiet voice went on, "I shall expect a good deal from you in return." She paused.

"I don't quite see what you mean," said Joyce, with a vague thought of increased fees.

"I mean I shall expect you to behave very much better, and to work much better, too."

"Oh," said Joyce thoughtfully.

"To behave very well, in fact, and to work very hard."

"Yes."

"I can sum up what I want—and what I *expect*—like this. It is that you shall do your best, try to do your best, in every department of school life—to make up for all the harm you have done."

She paused again and Joyce looked away.

"Will you promise to try?" she asked.

"I—yes."

"Then," said Miss Whitburn, "you may stay—but remember the conditions. If you cannot keep them you will have to go. Miss Western will want to see you now."

Joyce went back to the house, not exactly happy, but intensely relieved.

"Has Miss Whitburn decided to allow you to remain here?" asked Miss Western.

"Yes," said Joyce.

"It was represented to her that you allowed yourself to be led almost entirely by Nita, and that therefore Nita was chiefly responsible for your outrageous behaviour on Saturday night. If that is so, I can only say that I think it extremely weak and silly of you to have allowed yourself to be led by her. As you are going to remain at school I shall expect you to behave very much better, *very* much better." She

looked at Joyce impressively. "We cannot have you here if you behave as you did before," she said; "it lowers the whole tone of the house. From now onwards you will go on as though nothing had happened. That is all I have to say to you; you may go."

Joyce was very thankful to do so. She found Miss Western intolerably annoying. She was thinking hard, wondering, wondering—Miss Western had said "It was represented to her that you allowed yourself to be led——" "It was represented to her——?" What did that mean? Someone told her? Yes, but who? who?

Joyce went up to her room again, unpacked her suit-case and put away her things, and thought. She would have Alix now till one of them left. Ah, but would she? Alix had been kind—very kind last night, but might not that have been merely a sudden access of pity? Could she really have forgiven her? Well, she *should* forgive her, anyway, before the end of the term.

Joyce made her first public appearance at supper, as unobstrusively as possible. People looked suspiciously at her. People had already told each other that she had "been turfed out."

"Hullo," said somebody; "where have you been?"

"Been at the San.," Joyce answered truthfully.

"What's happened to Nita?"

"She's gone home."

"Oh," said somebody. "I thought perhaps she had."

After supper Joyce went up to her room again and read for a little; but she was restless, she wanted to see Alix. After much confused thinking and wondering and doubting, her thoughts resolved themselves into this—she must see Alix, she must see her now.

She went downstairs and walked along to the door of

Alix's study, but there were voices inside, so she walked past, and a little later walked back again. She hung about until it was time go to to bed, and even a few minutes after, but no one came out of the study and no one went in. After all, Alix might not be there at all. Joyce went to bed feeling rather depressed. Before she started to undress, however, she wrote a note on a scrap of paper and took it to Alix's room where she propped it against the looking-glass :

" You simply must come and say good night to me. Joyce."

After that she went to bed in comparative peace. She had expected to be at home by now, and here she was, instead, back in the room which she thought she had left for ever. It all seemed very strange.

After waiting some time she began to worry about Alix. Perhaps she had deliberately disregarded her appeal; or perhaps the slip of paper had blown away and was lying unheeded in some corner. She must come, she simply must! But perhaps she wouldn't. The clock struck half-past nine, and the prefects were supposed to be in bed by then, but still Joyce waited and listened. She was, by this time, convinced in her own mind that Alix was not coming and that she was no longer even interested in her and would merely regard her urgent entreaty as a piece of cheek. And yet she still hoped against hope.

She heard footsteps approaching her room, and a light knock, followed by her own voice, saying: " Come in! "

Alix came in and sat down on the bed.

" Isn't this splendid? " she said. " You see, life wasn't as black as you thought, after all. At least——" she faltered suddenly, " they *have* let you off, haven't they? "

" Oh, yes, they have let me off. I suppose it is splendid I wish I knew why."

"Why what?"

"Why they let me off."

"Don't you?"

"No. What do you mean?" Joyce asked, suddenly eager. "Do you?"

"I—oh—not exactly."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing; only I'm frightfully glad, and I must go because I'm late already. I oughtn't to have come really, only I had to come and just say how glad I was. Please let me go."

Joyce had put out a hand and held her by the skirt of her tunic.

"Not till you explain," she said.

"Explain what?"

"What you know about why they let me off."

"No, I——"

"Alix, was it you?"

"Was what me?"

"Somebody——" Joyce hesitated. It would be awkward if she had guessed wrong. "Somebody said something to Whitty," she stated vaguely.

"Oh," said Alix quickly. "Who said what?"

"Somebody—I don't know who—said something about —about Nita and me."

"Well," Alix answered slowly. "As a matter of fact, I did say something to her—but——"

"Then it *was* you!"

"Well, I don't know"

"It must have been. What did you say?"

"I told her what was true, and what that Western woman was too——" She broke off. "I mean, I told her that Nita simply did what she liked with you, and you just

did what you were told and had no will of your own."

"Oh," said Joyce, somewhat damped, "but it wasn't really like that, you know. I generally did what she wanted because it was generally what I wanted too; but I didn't always."

"You flatter yourself," said Alix. But a moment later she relented. "No, I don't mean that," she said. "I did put it a bit strongly—but it's the truth, all the same."

"I say, it was most frightfully—I mean, it was simply marvellous of you to go and do all that for me. Weren't you terrified?"

"Of what?"

"Of Whitty."

"Oh, no, I like her."

"Aren't you terrified of people you like? I am."

"That must be very awkward for you," Alix answered, laughing. "Is it rather nightmarish for you to have me sitting here, or do you not like me? Now then!"

"Oh, well; this is different," said Joyce hastily. "I mean I'm not frightened of you—now."

"Is this one of the rare occasions when you're not, then?"

"Well, yes; perhaps."

"Oh, Joyce, don't be so absurd!"

"I'm not; it's true."

"It's utter nonsense. Joyce, you are *glad* you're going to stay, aren't you? You don't *seem* terribly hilarious."

"Oh, of course, I'm awfully glad, only——"

"What?"

"Well, you know how everybody hates me now——"

"Oh, nonsense."

"It isn't nonsense. They do, and it won't be much fun going on here and being loathed by everyone, unless——"

"Yes?"

"If I could see you sometimes—I mean——"

"Of course you can see me. What do you mean?"

"I mean—like I used to. Have you forgiven me for the way I've treated you? I don't see how you could have, but have you?"

"You know I have," said Alix. "And now you must forget—forget all that's happened during this past year, and only remember what nice times we used to have together, out in the fields and at the San. and everything."

"Oh, the *San.*!" Joyce exclaimed. "How can I forget when *everything* reminds me?"

"It will be difficult, but you'll manage it, and we shall be very happy just till the end of the term—and afterwards you'll go on being happy and you'll be made a prefect and everything——"

"Alix!" Joyce gasped, "you're not *leaving*?"

"Yes. I thought you knew."

"*No!* Oh, Lord, how awful!"

"Oh, it won't be awful; you'll have settled down by that time—not that I shan't be sorry, but still——"

"What are you going to do?" Joyce asked a little listlessly.

Alix looked away. "I—I shall—marry," she murmured.

"You'll what?"

"Be married."

"*Married?*"

"Yes."

"That's what Nita always said. She's going to be married four times. A hand-reader person told her so."

"Oh, I don't mean like that quite," Alix explained. "I mean, I know who I'm going to marry."

"Good Lord! Do you mean you're *engaged*?"

"Well, practically, yes. I shall be nineteen in April and then I shall be old enough and then he can marry me." Her face lit up as she spoke and she seemed to be gazing at something far beyond the wall of the little room.

"How marvellous!" said Joyce. "Is he an artist, too?"

"Yes, he's young but he's *awfully* clever."

"How old is he?"

"Twenty-five."

"Oh, I don't call that young. Is he handsome?"

"He's perfectly . . ." Alix checked herself hastily. "You must ask a more impartial judge about that."

"But I don't know one. What do you think?"

"I think he is," Alix answered with great restraint.

"Then I'm sure he is. Oh, Alix, I *do* want to see him!"

Alix laughed at that. "Perhaps you will some day," she said. "I must go now."

"Oh, no, not yet. Will your father let you marry this man?"

"Oh, yes," she answered, rising.

"And will the man's father let him marry you?" Joyce persisted.

"Joyce, I *must* go! The man hasn't got a father."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Has he got a mother?"

"No. Good night."

"Good night. Poor man, and has he any——"

But Alix had shut the door.

"Well," said Joyce; "he's got you, anyway, it seems."

She lay back full of a great wonder. If anything could have given her a higher opinion of Alix than before it would have been just this finishing touch.

"How like her," Joyce thought, "to be so original—and so romantic."

XXI

IT was extremely difficult going back to everyday life again. A great many people had quite made up their minds that Joyce had been expelled and were completely at a loss to account for her reappearance. Still, Joyce had the easy explanation that she had merely been absent for a day, and most people accepted it. She found the work very difficult, as she had done as little as possible during the first part of that term and for several terms previously, and was now, at last, conscientiously trying to do her best. It was a very poor best to begin with, but it improved towards the end of the term, along with everything else.

Often and often at this time Joyce thought that if it were not for Alix she would run away. But Alix seemed to put colour into the dreariness of school and to make light of the difficulties in a way that was little short of miraculous. She did, in fact, make Joyce's life worth living. They went on again with the reading that Nita had interrupted; sitting in the same old field, under the same kindly oak tree. The place was alive with memories and, sitting there listening to Alix, Joyce could almost imagine that the last year had never been and that everything was just as it used to be. Sometimes Alix even read the same things that she had read before and that Joyce had forgotten since. Once Joyce recognized, with a start of horror, the very words that she had applied to Nita before the fateful dance—

"*My conqueror's blood was cool as a deep river*
In shadow ; and my heart beneath your hand
Quieter than a dead man on a bed."

Sometimes, too, Alix would read her own poems to Joyce, but she wrote very little now, and was always rather shy of reading them, although Joyce was an enthusiastic listener.

"Do you ever read them to *him*?" Joyce asked once, and Alix answered :

"No, but he reads them to himself sometimes. He's a harsher critic than you are!" But she laughed; and Joyce gathered that she did not mind the harsh criticism.

Long afterwards Joyce would read those poems to herself, and they were like charms for conjuring up Alix before her, they brought her back so vividly. She seemed to see her fair head, bent above the book, her hair that was gold where the sun touched it, and her mysterious face, mysterious because it seemed to conceal so much that Joyce wanted to see. There was a strangely unknowable quality in her so that Joyce wondered if there was, or ever would be, anyone who really knew her. It was as though she had had fairy blood, Joyce thought.

Because of all this the remaining part of that summer term may be said to have been a happy time for Joyce, though in almost every other way it was the worst time she had ever had. She did, however, have a ray of comfort from home in the shape of a letter from Dick. He said :

"Dear Joyce,

"I am sorry you are having such a rotten time. I do see that all this fuss must have been pretty awful for you. I hope things are better now. I am glad they have turned that girl out. I knew she would never do anything but harm; that type never does.

" Mother seems to be bearing up; she hasn't taken this to heart as much as you seem to think.

" You must have a pretty good nerve to do a thing like that; I shouldn't have thought you were capable of it! I am glad you had a run for your money, anyway. But you had better not tell mother the story in so much detail as you told it me. I don't quite know how much she does know about what you did, and so I have said nothing. She really might get a bit worked up if you told her all you told me.

" Sunbeam has been lame again; I have had a good deal of trouble with her one way and another just lately, but I think she's getting all right now. The others are all right. That patent bit thing that Alan got was no end of a frost, absolutely useless. He rides Samson with an ordinary double rein now, which I always thought was much the best way. Misty is getting quite fat in your absence. I've been riding her sometimes when Sunbeam was bad.

" I must stop now, but mind you don't let any of your old schoolmistresses and people browbeat you over this!

" Yours with love,

" Dick."

That was a very long letter from Dick. He was not a good letter writer, his letters being few and far between, and generally consisting of about ten lines chiefly concerned with a new kind of diet for the horses or something of the kind. He was one of those people who never mention their thoughts or feelings in a letter except in the most guarded terms. Joyce was very grateful to him for that letter; she knew that he had meant to cheer her up and he had succeeded rather well. She showed the letter to Alix, who thought it very sympathetic.

" He must be very fond of the horses," she remarked.

"He is," Joyce answered; "specially Sunbeam; he's devoted to her, though he doesn't show it in an ordinary way."

During the intervals of reading Joyce and Alix used to talk quite a lot. It was during one of these talks that Joyce discovered the name of the man Alix was going to marry. In a general way Alix preferred to refer to him by pronouns only, but in course of time Joyce gathered that his name was Robin. It appeared that he had been for some time a great friend, as he had been a protégé of Alix's father and constantly came to see him. Later he came even more constantly, to see Alix. It all sounded amazingly romantic and exciting to Joyce.

"I think I'll get married too," she said. "It sounds lovely—but I don't know who to marry."

"Oh, there's plenty of time yet," Alix answered, laughing.

"Um," Joyce answered, a little doubtfully. "I'm nearly seventeen."

"It's strange," she said, another time, "how easily we seem to have picked up the old threads and sort of started again from where we left off. I didn't deserve it, I know I didn't. Do you remember when Nita was new and I was coming here with you, to read, and then I didn't come?"

Alix nodded.

"I told you that I'd promised before to go out with Nita and then forgotten or something, didn't I?"

"Nothing nearly so straightforward as that," Alix answered, with a sort of laugh.

"Well, it wasn't true," Joyce went on, "whatever it was. It was just that Nita simply made me go with her, and she made up an excuse for me to tell you."

"Then it was the most unconvincing excuse she ever invented," said Alix.

"That was only because I was so nervous, because I knew it wasn't true; and you—well, I wasn't sure that you believed it either."

"No," said Alix. "I understood. But you must forget all that, I told you to before, and you ought to have done it by now."

"How can I, when it's mucked up the whole of my life here like it has? Do you think I shall ever forget that dance? Oh, but it was fun though!"

"Yes," said Alix, "of course it was a frightful thing for the house and the prefects and all the rest of it, but I must say I sympathized with you—only it was too expensive."

Joyce was surprised. "I didn't know you sympathized," she said, "but you're right, it was too expensive—though it was the only time I ever knew her get caught. She *was* clever, you know. She always made her excuses sound so true, somehow, and so likely, too. I never could."

"Don't let's talk about her. You'll never forget if you dwell on her like this."

"No," said Joyce absently, and went on dwelling. Presently she said: "You know, when she came to stay with me that time, she never rested until she'd got Dick more or less potty about her, and then she began on Alan."

"Yes," said Alix; "that's what I should have expected."

"Would you? I never did. But any sort of man would do for her. She got off with the boy in Begson's when she couldn't get anyone better. I really was fed up with her over that—but she never minded what I thought." Now that she was well away, Joyce felt she must go on. "When I was in London staying with her there was a boy there, a cousin of hers or something, and he kissed me—it *was* awful."

Alix laughed, and Joyce, rather disconcerted, glanced at

her and hurried on. She would never understand Alix, she knew.

"I thought, because it was the first time, you know, that he cared about me, like I did about him. Then I told Nita and she said he didn't care about me a scrap; she said he always carried on like that. I was so ashamed of myself—I felt so *cheap*. It was awful. I went to the dance with that same boy. Of course, I didn't know it was going to be him until I got there, or I wouldn't have gone—but I loved him almost as much as ever, when I got there."

"And did he kiss you again?" asked Alix.

"No; he could have, but he didn't—thank heaven. But it was wonderful, in a way, that time in London."

"Yes," said Alix slowly, "it makes such a difference. I don't think you are ever quite the same again, afterwards."

Joyce looked at her. She was surprised that she had taken it all so calmly; surprised and relieved; she had expected her to be rather disgusted; in a way she had regarded telling Alix about it rather in the light of a confession; and Alix had laughed! There was a long silence. At last Joyce said: "No, I don't think you are." And Alix went on reading.

Often and often as Joyce lay in bed at night, thinking gloomily of the events of the day and all the prep. for which she had not had time, she heard the well-known footsteps in the passage. When Alix came Joyce generally greeted her with a long and woeful story of the day's events and still more gloomy prophecies as to the next day. She listened to it all in sympathetic silence and at the end had always something to say which made it all seem only half as bad and less than half as important. Sometimes it was an idea for an essay, sometimes a translation of some abstruse Latin phrase; whatever it was it was always something that seemed to smooth out the difficulty. She did all that could be don

and Joyce used to sleep peacefully after unloading her troubles onto her.

Not the least of those troubles was that Joyce had got to take "school certificate" that term. In vain had she begged Miss Archer, her form mistress, to let her off doing it, or at least to let her put it off till next term. "Your name is entered for it," said Miss Archer, "and you must take it. I warned you before that you would have to raise your standard of work." She got no sympathy from her. It was getting so near the time now, and Joyce was convinced that she knew nothing whatever. Alix had taken it successfully two years before and was very encouraging about it, but still Joyce felt extremely apprehensive.

A panic swept over the whole form a few days before the beginning of the exam. They worked at every possible instant. They worked in bed at night and in bed in the morning, and they slept with books under their pillows. They also worked every evening after supper, and cut games, whenever possible, to work! Whenever Alix found Joyce working at night she would take the books away and give them back the next morning. She was, in fact, bound to, as a prefect; but she would have done it in any case.

"You're a perfect ass," she told Joyce, "to strain your eyes and worry yourself like this. You must take some time off or you'll be a nervous wreck by the time the exam. comes on."

In spite of all Alix's persevering encouragement, Joyce went dithering into the examination room on the first morning. The paper was "history outline," and her mind was a complete blank, behind which seethed innumerable facts, dates and names in hopeless confusion. She knew as much as most of the others; but nothing short of psycho-analysis could have made her produce that knowledge in a coherent form. For two and a half hours the others sat

madly writing and casting apprehensive glances at the clock, but Joyce sat madly searching the paper for a question that conveyed some meaning to her. In the end she found three questions of this kind and wrote five pages. Most of the others wrote about fourteen. Joyce came out of the examination room feeling certain of failure, but she cheered up when they were given some biscuits and taken down to the beach to bathe. The others were all in school now, working, and somehow that thought lent an added joy to the bathe. Also the other people taking the exam. regarded Joyce as a fellow sufferer, not, as most people did just then, as a social outcast. It was really great fun, as she soon discovered, coming out of an exam., while the rest of the school was working, and being given biscuits and lemonade, and discussing the papers with the others. It was even more fun afterwards when they went down to the beach and bathed, or sat under the trees on the playing fields and "revised," pausing sometimes to watch the little cotton wool clouds sailing slowly through the deep blue sky.

After three days Joyce said to Alix:

"I know now, of course, that I haven't a chance, but we have such fun that I think it's really worth it."

But as fast as the thought of the exam. ceased to be a menace to Joyce it was replaced by the thought of Alix's approaching departure. In vain Alix pointed out that people would, by next term, have nearly forgotten their lost half-holiday, and that Joyce would make friends again. All that Joyce would say was:

"Perhaps, if I am very miserable, they will let me leave at Christmas."

When, however, Alix had the happy thought of suggesting that they should write to each other, Joyce's depression lightened considerably.

The exam. was over now and Joyce could breathe again. Never in her life had she worked so hard as during that month, and when the tension was at last released she found herself very tired. Fortunately, the certificate people were not expected to work much in the week that remained. During that week Joyce and Alix were together every evening. It was their last week together and they made the most of it. Twice Alix got permission for them to go out of the school grounds after supper, and they went down to the sea. As Alix was by now a school prefect and was leaving, any privilege within reason was readily allowed her, so she took Joyce out with her. Once they sat in Alix's study after supper, and sometimes they wandered round the playing fields, but that was very public. Everyone was out there after supper in the summer. Some of them even had a gramophone out on a seat under one of the biggest trees, over by the tennis courts.

On the last Saturday they went, for the last time, to their own oak tree. Sitting under the tree, they gazed out across the fields that sloped gently down to a little slow-flowing stream and away to where they rose again to a little tree-covered hill.

"This is not the country for me," Alix exclaimed suddenly. "These little mounds all covered with trees—they're not hills. Mine are the great bare hills covered with stones and heather, all rough and jagged, and mixed up with the clouds."

"I'm afraid your hills would frighten me," said Joyce; "I'm not—not big enough for them. I like my own best. You ought to see them, Alix; you'd love them. They're so—comforting."

"'By them and the gods of the south country
My poor soul shall be healed'—

that style of hill—yes, comforting, I suppose." She went on reading. Joyce was never tired of watching her as she read; and watching her then, she remembered something, heard and forgotten again, some years before.

"Do you remember," she asked, when Alix paused for a moment, "something about

> 'Her grave and—something—head
> Was half the meaning of the things she said'?

something like that, at least; do find it if you can."

Alix found and read it, and Joyce remembered how perfectly each phrase had seemed to fit, especially that:

> "*Her grave small lovely head*
> *Seemed half the meaning of the words she said.*"

Alix had also brought her own manuscript book of poems.

"I haven't looked at this for a long time," she said, picking it up. She turned the pages slowly, reading little bits to herself, re-discovering long-forgotten incidents and ideas.

"This was a long time ago," she said, "did you ever feel like this?—

> "*Dear night, return to me what the day took,*
> *And all the wear and tear and all the pain,*
> *Oh give to me the peace that I forsook,*
> *Oh give it back again!*
>
> *Oh night, be kind to me; oh happy stars,*
> *You shine on me as through a veil of doubt:*
> *They all are there, though hid behind these bars,*
> *The bars that shut me out.*

" Give me the flowers of all the things most dear
In years gone by;
Oh render unto me this that I ask,
And I will take the rest without a sigh,
And bear the task."

" Yes," said Joyce slowly; " the day is one long nightmare as often as not, the night is a merciful release. Is that what you meant? "

" Something like that. Oh, here's an even older one. I wrote this my first term:

' To part is the heart of sorrow,
To meet is the fleet desire,
On the wings of despair to borrow
The joy of another hour.

' To die is the sigh of the saddest,
To sleep in the deep is best,
But death is the cry of the maddest,
To die and forget the rest.' "

The unwelcome sound of the chapel bell broke in upon their thoughts in the silence that followed the last poem.

" Heavens! " said Alix, " we must fly. I'd no idea it was so late."

They gathered up the books and ran.

On Sunday there were the usual references to " those who are leaving us " and the usual hymns about " Though never more in one place all may gather."

Joyce felt that she had never realized the significance of it till now. She had always thought, on these occasions, of the nice people who were leaving, people who had been good and popular heads of the house or the school, or captains of games, or her own favourite prefects, but not her friends,

no one she really *knew*, and certainly no one like Alix. She had generally felt rather sad when they sang that hymn and "Standing forth on life's rough way," but there was almost always the comforting thought that some nasty people were leaving too, and there would be new heads and captains who would probably be just as good as the old ones, though possibly without their glamour. Besides, it was impossible to be really sad when it was nearly the last day of term. But this term all that was changed. Alix was going and nothing else mattered. Alix was going and Joyce would be left alone. That hymn had never struck her as anything terrible before, that "Praise to our God, who with love never swerving——" but now it was dreadful—dreadful. Alix would never sing it again, but she would. Still, it was comforting to think that when she sang it again she would, with any luck, be mourning her own departure. But even so, a whole term alone. . . Alix sang a solo in the anthem that Sunday. What, Joyce wondered, would the carols be like without her? They might as well not have them, as far as she was concerned.

After that Sunday came the interminable day when, after packing, everyone wanders about feeling bored and hungry. Some of the time Joyce spent with Alix, but they only wandered round the school grounds with a sort of listless despair, and hardly talked at all; and all the afternoon and most of the evening Alix was busy saying good-bye to staff and getting everything settled up. Every time Joyce went along the study passage she saw Alix's packing case all nailed up and labelled. Only leaving people had packing cases, and Joyce stood and gazed at it, reading the label again and again till she could bear the sight of it no longer.

At last the night came; the last night, which should be such a happy time and was now a time of such strangely

mixed feelings. Never had Joyce been more overjoyed at the thought of getting home. Never before had she had so much to flee from. And if Alix had been coming back next term that night would have been quite blissful. But she was not. The thought of getting away from this nightmare of school to a place where people were friendly automatically or at least civil, and where you could do what you liked all day and wear nice clothes, a place where you had friends and could be with them and live in peace and happiness, the thought of it was almost too wonderful to believe. But there was Alix. And there was next term. Next term, in the distance, but none the less real for that, seemed a great sea of wretchedness stretching away to the very horizon, and with never an island to cheer its bleak, grey surface.

Joyce went to bed thinking of all this, and lay gazing out at the sky where the colours of sunset were fading to grey. She watched them fade and vanish and the colour die out of everything, and likened it to Alix's going. She waited and listened long, oppressed and saddened by the gathering twilight. She heard some prefects come up to bed, and later she heard some more, but no Alix; and Alix had promised to come. She heard two of the prefects, the two that slept at the end of her corridor, go past her room on their way to the bathrooms. Some time later she heard one of them going back from her bath, and, later still, the other: but still no sign of Alix. After that everything was quite silent for a long time. Joyce got out of bed and took her watch over to the window. It was ten minutes to ten. She told herself that Alix was not coming and got back into bed, but without the slightest intention of going to sleep. It might be nearly ten now, but it would be a good deal later than that before she gave up hope. She lay with her eyes still fixed on the white square of window, and heard the great clock strike

ten in the night silence while she waited and listened. Soon after that she heard second rounds beginning upstairs, then someone coming down to her corridor and the opening and shutting of doors reached her, passed her, died away, and the silence came back.

It seemed a long time later that Joyce was roused from the beginnings of sleep by a knock at her door. It was a very quiet knock, but even in her sleep she was waiting for it. And so at last Alix came to her and sat on her bed.

"I'm so sorry I'm so late," she said. "I hope you haven't been keeping awake for me or anything. Miss Whitburn had all the leaving pres. to dinner and we couldn't get away for ages. It went off wonderfully well considering how blue everyone was feeling. I almost thought I wouldn't come for fear of waking you, and then I thought you might have kept awake on purpose and be disappointed."

"Well, as a matter of fact, I did," said Joyce. "What's the time now?"

"Getting on for eleven, I think."

"Good Lord!"

"I hope you won't be too frightfully tired in the morning will you?"

"I don't expect so, but it won't matter if I am; there's no work to-morrow. Oh, Alix, it's going to be so awful without you next term; I can't face it. I shall just refuse to come back!"

"You coward!"

That shot struck home.

"Would it be *very* cowardly?"

"Very."

"Oh!"

"Joyce, you're not to *think* of such a thing, do you see?

I shall be *so* ashamed of you if you get frightened and won't face it."

"Will you?"

"Terribly. I wanted to run away once, and I couldn't, and I'm so glad now. It was my first term, and I was most frightfully unhappy. Everyone was very kind to me and all that, but there didn't seem to be anyone who was in the least my sort. It was all so strange and horrible and I couldn't make friends with any of the people. I felt so lost and miserable; so out of place. Oh, it was horrible! I never would ask anyone anything, and so I could never find my way about, and I never did the right preps. or anything. I wrote to my father and asked him to take me away, but he wouldn't. And as he wouldn't take me away I thought I would just go, because I hated it all so. I didn't tell him that, but somehow he guessed and he wrote and told me he was going to Spain for a bit. He didn't really go to Spain, or anywhere else either; but I thought he had, and so I stayed because I had nowhere to escape to. It was a bad reason for staying, of course, but it was better than nothing. It was terrible at the time, and I was very angry when I found out what he had done. But I'm awfully glad now."

"Was that when you wrote that poem?" Joyce asked.

"Yes, that was then. Now can you face next term?"

"Yes, *now* I can; but I shan't be able to then, when you're not here any longer."

"Oh, Joyce, why *are* you so weak? Can't you see that *all* your trouble has come from that? If only you hadn't let Nita lead you, as you did—but it's no good saying that now; only, can't you do better this time?"

"I don't know," said Joyce. "I'm made that way."

"You're not, Joyce; you're *not* made that way; nobody's

made that way. You could be as strong as she was if you tried hard enough."

"It's easy for you to talk," said Joyce; "it would be all right if I was like you—but I'm not."

"Well, I shouldn't like you if you were, if that's any consolation to you," said Alix. "But I wasn't strong enough for her," she added, more to herself. "I shall never forgive myself that; look what I might have saved you——"

"Oh, don't be silly, that was my fault."

"Well now, what about next term? We must get this settled. Will you be all right?"

"Yes—I think so. If you write to me."

"Very well. I will write you constant sermons, and if you do all I tell you you will be a leader of the school and all that in no time!"

Joyce laughed. "The way you talk, sometimes," she said, "anyone would think you were human!"

"But you, of course, would know better!"

"I think perhaps your grandmother was a changeling."

"Is that a compliment or otherwise?"

"Oh, a compliment."

"Well," said Alix thoughtfully; "she may have been, I never met her."

"Alix!—Suppose we never meet again after to-morrow?"

"Oh, we shall meet again all right."

"How do you know?"

"I don't know, we just shall."

"Oh!" Joyce was obviously much relieved. "I just suddenly thought that," she explained, "and it was so awful."

"Anyway, we shall think of each other. Some people think that's enough."

"Yes, but I'm not one of them. Still, if you're sure that's

all right. I wonder if you could come and stay with me—some time?"

"Perhaps—some time. Do you remember when you asked me before?"

"No! Did I?"

"Yes. When we were at the San. together."

"Oh, yes—and couldn't you come? I can't remember what happened about it."

"By the time I could come you had ceased to want me."

"Oh," said Joyce, as if Alix had struck her.

"I'm sorry," Alix said; "I shouldn't have said that. I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it, Joyce."

"It's me that's sorry," Joyce answered; "You were too kind to me."

"No."

"Yes. However, it's all over now. Only—it was horrible. Do you remember when you came and tried to make me give Nita up? I don't know how you could ever forgive me for the things I said then. I can't bear to think of it—and to think that you were right!——"

"Don't talk about it," Alix interrupted hastily. "I can't bear to think of it, either. I made a most ghastly mess of it."

"It wasn't you, it was me—*me*. Did you really mind my having powder? I've got some now. I'll throw it away if you like."

"No, of course not. I thought it was all pretty silly, but I didn't mind your having it in the least. What I minded was—well, it showed which way the wind blew. Anyone could see it was Nita's idea. I think she spent most of her time thinking of things like that. There'll be nothing left for her when she's old."

"She doesn't think she'll live to be old; she thinks she will meet with a violent death."

"I should think it's quite possible."

"But she says if she does live to be old she'll be a wild old woman haunting night clubs."

"M'm," said Alix; "that's not as romantic as it sounds. I don't think she will ever be happy—but so few people are, perhaps it doesn't matter—but I was always sorry for her."

"How angry she would have been if she had known!" said Joyce with a laugh. "They say pity is akin to love," she added reflectively.

"It wasn't in this case," Alix answered gravely.

"Nita says she's never loved anyone," Joyce volunteered. "She says she never likes people more than she liked me—which wasn't much."

"How desperately pointless her life must be."

"Yes, mustn't it? I'm nearly always in love with somebody myself."

"How do you mean?" Alix asked.

"Well, sometimes it's only people in books or films," Joyce explained, "and of course that doesn't really count; but sometimes it's real people. I got terribly in love with a gamekeeper once at home—it used to be so awkward." She smiled, remembering how awkward it had been. "I was always going for walks where I thought I should meet him; but I never dared to speak to him, except to say good morning or something; so it wasn't much good. I fell in love with a bus driver, too, when I was twelve; but I wasn't so bashful then; I was always giving him things—sweets and tobacco and things—and going for rides on the bus when I didn't a bit want to get to anywhere. He must have thought I was mad, because I used to go somewhere, quite a long way away, and then come straight back again when the

bus came back. Then a friend of mine went and told him about it, just for a rag. I *did* feel such a fool when I found out; and of course I went off him directly."

"I gather you're not very ambitious!" said Alix. "I don't get like that myself. I shouldn't now, of course, anyway; but I didn't before either. It must be horribly unsettling. Like these insane children here who are always getting 'keen' on people. One of them was keen on me once. I did hate it. She was always giving me things and hanging round me. It was really most embarrassing. I used to go out of my way to avoid her, after a time."

"Oh, I never got like *that*," Joyce hastened to assure her, "but heaps of people do, of course. In fact, lots of people think you're mad if you don't. José was awful that way. She had someone different every few weeks. All that set's like that now, Betty and Gwen and people."

"Yes, it does seem futile, doesn't it?—I say, what's the time?"

"Oh, it's quite early; and nobody minds on the last night."

"It's getting awfully late. I really *ought* to go."

"Oh, Alix don't go! Alix darling, don't go yet. Heaven only knows how long it will be before I see you again—to talk to, I mean. Oh, I wish you needn't *ever* go!"

"Do you really?" Alix asked, laughing a little. "I'm afraid I should get rather tired of sitting here, after two or three days!"

"Well, I wish we could always live together then."

"I don't know that that would do either—you'd go off and marry a porter or a bus driver before I knew where I was."

"I think you would go first," said Joyce, with something like a sigh, "and marry an artist."

"Certainly when I *did* go I *should* marry an artist——" said Alix—"I'm going now."

But Joyce, in a kind of panic, grasped her by the wrists.

"You mustn't go!" she said wildly, "you shan't go. I can't do without you; you can't go. Don't go and leave me for ever and ever, Alix; don't—don't——"

"Oh, *Joyce*!" Alix exclaimed, half reproachful, half angry.

Joyce let her go and dropped back on the pillow. "I haven't forgotten," she said; "but you *must* write—otherwise I can't bear it. Promise."

"Promise."

"Go quickly then—Good night."

"Good night." Alix went quickly, knowing only too well how short-lived were Joyce's moments of strength.

A moment later Joyce knew it too.

At breakfast next morning Joyce saw Alix again. Everyone was half mad by then with happiness and excitement; everyone, that is, who was not leaving and was not Joyce. Alix looked very calm, and Joyce, watching her, hoped that she looked so too. She did not feel it.

Later that morning, at the station, Joyce touched Alix's hand and they faced each other for one brief moment—and parted.

XXII

AT home, at first, Joyce could find nothing but vain regrets and longings. She did not want to be at home, she wanted to be with Alix—and she did not much care where. And sometimes even now her mind was clouded by a thought—next term—but that was miles away.

Home ties, home interests, grew upon her gradually. After three weeks she was back again in the old life—riding, bathing, tennis, and going on the river—it all came back. And then there were the people. People who had always been there and been her friends, long ago before ever she went to Laykington, were there to greet her now. Girls who had been at the same day school with her and with whom she had had such games and such fun—some time ago—they were there still, and as friendly as ever—but they were not like Alix. They were more like Laura and Bess and José; very nice, as far as they went, and very kind; but better to play tennis with them than to tell your thoughts to.

Joyce was a little aloof during those holidays; she did not seek out the company of her friends as she had been wont to do. She wasted an immense amount of time in wandering aimlessly round the house and garden, visiting the stables, wandering round the lawn, eating a few raspberries, or climbing a tree, always with the same preoccupied air and with her thoughts racing on. . . .

Towards the middle of September she became really apprehensive. She tried her hardest to fix her thoughts on

the present and blind herself to the future, but it was not always possible. It was especially difficult when she was in bed, for then the thought of school would force itself upon her and she had no way of escape. Sometimes, also, her mother would be so tactless, saying that she must look over her school clothes or that she must go to the dentist soon because the time was " getting on " ; and the papers began, about that time, to be so tactless too. Joyce hardly dared to open a paper because they all said " School outfits for boys and girls. Splendid value in girls' navy serge gym. tunics." They also said such things as, " Now that the cold weather is approaching, be ready with your Maltoveen," and " The kiddies must be strong and healthy to meet the wear and tear of school again." Well before the middle of September, Joyce encountered several articles beginning, " Now that the holidays are over," or " Now that summer is almost ended." It was all very horrible; why, she wondered, must they be so previous? And yet, in a way, they were terribly right—there was less than a fortnight left. Each day now was a precious thing that must be used to its uttermost and in no way wasted. No moment must be allowed to be less happy than it might, no precious hour must slip away unnoticed—for there were only a few more days before she must embark on three months of unthinkable horror. Every day and in every way Joyce fled from the thought of it, but there were always unguarded moments when it caught her, and then there was the night. . . .

Joyce suffered in silence, not breathing a word of her worries to anyone, but she was none the happier for that. Only Alix knew and understood and sympathized—but Alix was miles away. She had said what she could, to make things easier, and she had made them easier, at the time, but now the memory of her words was not enough.

On the evening of the last day Joyce sought and found her mother in the garden and told her of her resolution to leave Laykington at Christmas. Mrs. Aylmer seemed unpleasantly surprised. She put down her watering-can and looked at Joyce.

"But you are only just seventeen," she said. "You're much too young to leave."

"Lots of people leave when they're only just seventeen," Joyce answered doggedly.

"I would rather you stayed for the whole year," said Mrs. Aylmer, "but you must ask Daddy about it if you are really set on leaving."

"But I really can't stay on any longer," Joyce pleaded; "I hate it all."

"You'll get over that."

"No. I'm sure I never shall. I hate everything to do with it."

"Are you really unhappy there?" Mrs. Aylmer asked. "Weren't the girls nice to you?"

She had put her finger on the crucial spot and yet—it was pride versus policy, and pride had it.

"Oh, well, you know," Joyce said hastily, "it's all so boring and silly. I just feel thoroughly fed up with it." She could not bring herself, even in such a cause, to own to the one unforgivable sin, unpopularity.

"Oh, nonsense, it's absurd of you to talk like that at your age."

"But I'm old for my age."

"You're not, Joyce; don't be silly."

"Oh, you don't understand!" Joyce exclaimed hopelessly turning away.

"Yes, I do. You've got to a stage when you think you are too old for school and you want to leave, but you'll find

as you stay on, that you're not a bit too old really, and you'll fit into everything beautifully and enjoy it all like anything. You can take that exam. again that you failed in last term, and get into the sixth, and then I expect they will make you a prefect and you will be quite at the top of the school and have all sorts of privileges and a study of your own—you ought to be looking forward to it all."

"Well, I'm not; I just loathe the thought of it."

"Well, if you really think you want to leave you'd better ask Daddy about it; but I would very much rather you stayed on until July at least."

It was obviously no good going on arguing with her, so Joyce went in search of her father. She found him in his study with a pipe and the evening paper.

"Daddy," she said.

"M'm."

"I've been telling Mummie—I want to leave school this term."

"Oh," said her father, raising his eyes from the paper; "how's that?"

"Well I—I'm so sick of it."

"Nonsense."

"And I'm too old really——"

"You old!"

"Well, I mean—yes, I am old for my age."

"Nonsense. Who's been filling your head with that rubbish?"

"Lots of people do leave when they're only my age, you know," Joyce persisted.

"Much too young. What would you do with yourself if you did leave?"

"Oh, I——" Joyce hadn't thought of that. "I suppose I could do something."

"What?"

"I could help Mummie."

"Help her do what?"

"Oh, anything."

"Your mother doesn't want you hanging about helping her, she doesn't do anything she needs help with."

Joyce wished that she could hope to get married at once and get out of the difficulty that way, but of course it would be worse than useless to suggest that. Then she had a sudden inspiration.

"I could be thinking about it next term," she said, "and decide then what to do."

"You'll find you don't want to leave, once you get back."

"Oh, no, *really* I shan't."

"It's no good your going on arguing, you're too young to leave school."

"But, Daddy, lots of people——"

"That's nothing to me. You can leave at the end of the year, though you'll be rather young even then."

Well, if they wouldn't understand, they wouldn't, and there was nothing more to be done. Joyce went out into the garden again, not feeling herself to be fit company for anyone.

Next day she went back to school.

Everything was much as Joyce had expected. People in general had forgiven her for the events of the preceding term, but she had no friends. They had not forgiven her enough to be friendly. Nita's friends completely ignored her, Laura and Bess were almost hostile—and Alix was gone. Joyce missed her desperately. There seemed to be such a gap in everything, a space that only she could fill, and she was gone. Joyce made a considerable effort to make the best of things and make friends again with the others, but

it did not seem much use. There was no one there that she wanted for a friend, and no one that wanted her. She was forced to keep herself to herself, and, being of a sociable disposition, she found herself extremely lonely. Soon after the beginning of term she had a letter from Alix. A very kind letter it was, and meant to cheer her up; and in a way it succeeded, but in another way it made her feel worse than before because it made her miss Alix so.

Joyce was supposed to be working hard this term and preparing to take school certificate again in December, as she had failed in it the term before. She made some strenuous efforts to work, but hard work did not come naturally to her and she found it almost impossible to concentrate on anything for long There always seemed to be so many other things to think about, and all such horrible things!

At this time, to add one more to Joyce's long list of worries, a great enmity was formed between herself and a girl called Phyllis Gregory, for no better reason, apparently, than that their desks were next to each other in the senior prep. room. It was not started so much by one cause as by numberless little incidents. Being next to each other they perpetually borrowed each other's books and blotting paper, and moreover Phyllis had a habit of taking Joyce's pencils and pens, which Joyce resented. The consequence of this was that if either lost anything out of her desk she always imagined that the other had taken it. These little incidents, added to a natural antipathy, soon made complete enemies of the two. As this enmity increased Phyllis and her friends, an unpleasant set at best, began making a dead set at Joyce. They knocked things off her desk, as though by accident, and hid her books while she was out of the room. They also made very pointed remarks, to each other, about "some people," when she was in it. Joyce retaliated,

of course, but that only made it worse, and she had no friends to support her. When Phyllis knocked down Joyce's flowers, Joyce spilt ink on Phyllis's books, and when Joyce spilt ink on Phyllis's books, Phyllis dropped Joyce's pencil-box down behind the radiator, and so they went on.

But this was only one of many annoyances.

Laura and Bess and several of their contemporaries had been made prefects at the beginning of the term to make up for those who had left at the end of the year before. Also, owing to the lacrosse captain of the house having left, Laura was made captain, although only a new prefect. It was unusual, but Laura was adequate. Joyce resented this advancement of her one-time friends. She objected to it partly because it made her feel left behind, but chiefly because she could not endure to be ordered about by them. It was almost more than she could bear to hear them say "Hurry up, Joyce," or "Joyce, behave properly." Though in justice to them it must be admitted that they avoided speaking to her when possible.

Joyce had, the year before, been quite promising at lacrosse, although she avoided games whenever possible. When it had not been possible to avoid it she had played not badly, and had actually attained to the second set at the end of the season. But this term she had not seemed able to play at all and had been sent back to the third set again. Moreover, Laura took it upon herself to urge Joyce not to slack and to play up, if only for the credit of the house, and so on. Joyce was furious. She knew that she was playing badly, but to have Laura, *Laura*, telling her not to slack——! she said nothing to Laura, but she replied by slacking in such a marked manner that she was sent down to the fourth set where she remained for several weeks.

Joyce wrote long letters to Alix in which she told her what

she thought of Laura, Phyllis Gregory, and school in general. It was almost her only way of letting off steam, and Alix forgave her easily and wrote sympathetic and encouraging letters in response, on which Joyce lived for days. Joyce also wrote home and urged her people to let her leave, but they would not relent.

"If only I was a pre.," Joyce wrote to Alix once, "it wouldn't be so bad, only I shouldn't ever be one, of course, even if I did stay on." But, amazingly enough, she was made a prefect at half-term. At first she was extremely hopeful about it and wrote Alix a letter that might almost have been considered cheerful. She said how she would enjoy having a study and "bossing people about," and being equal with Laura again and all the rest of it, but Alix was a little doubtful.

The next letter she had from Joyce confirmed her worst fears. Joyce said:

"Being a pre. is not much like I thought it would be, in fact, it's an awful washout and everything is perfectly beastly. Laura tries to boss me about almost more than she did before because of her having been a pre. longer than me; isn't it absurd? Also people very often won't do what I tell them which is awful because after I've told them to do something and they've said they won't there doesn't seem to be anything more to say about it, as far as I can see! If I threaten them they just seem to go on, generally, as if nothing had happened. Beastly little rotters—Oh, Lord, how they do annoy me sometimes! How did *you* make people do what you told them? I suppose there must be some way, but I don't know what it is. *You* never had any trouble with them like that, did you? I think I haven't enough prestige or dignity or something. Do write and tell me what you did about it.

"I am sharing the second study with Erica Windsor—it might be worse, but it's a jolly good thing it's not!

"My people are brutes, I've written to them millions of times to ask them to let me leave, and they still won't let me. They don't know how miserable I am, don't you think life is a ghastly business? I do. I think it's all simply awful—at least until you leave school. It does annoy me so when people hand out all that bilge about it being the happiest time of your life; I'm sure it's only because they've forgotten what it's really like.

"*Please do write soon.* I can't stand much more of this, the thought of staying on till the end of the summer makes me feel sick with loathing. I wish I hadn't been made a pre. It is a devilish business. You simply must write to me soon—

"With tons and tons of love from

"JOYCE."

Alix did write soon. She wrote the next day:—

"DEAREST JOYCE,—I am so sorry you are finding it difficult being a pre.; I was afraid you would, at first. I think it's terribly difficult to begin with generally, but it very soon gets easier.

"I can't tell you much about what to do. You have to find out for yourself. Only this: don't make empty threats and don't ever, *ever*, let people off.

"As for Laura, she will probably get better as time goes on, but even if she doesn't you mustn't mind. There are always some people like that.

"You must enjoy having a study, don't you? And staying up late and being able to go into the shops—not that that is much of a privilege for you—but still, there is a lot of fun to be got out of being a pre., especially if you are in the sixth,

as you will be next term, if you stay. I can't write any more just now, I have to go and sit for Robin as he is painting me. Write again soon and tell me things are better.

"With very much love from

"ALIX."

The letter which answered this reassured Alix a good deal. Joyce seemed to be settling down to being a prefect, and though she still complained of difficulty in keeping order, even that seemed to be becoming easier. Alix ventured, for the first time, to hope that Joyce might really stay on and be happy again, make friends and get into the sixth and enjoy what was, to her mind, the best part of school. Alix, standing in front of her mirror, was thinking of these things. She went on mechanically running the comb through and through her hair, and gazing into the steady grey eyes that returned her look so gravely; but she was not thinking of her hair or eyes; she was trying, for the hundredth time, to solve Joyce's problems for her, but she was also hoping, for the first time, that those problems might be removed altogether. She was rather lightly clad in a dress of periwinkle blue, and looked more charming than ever she had at school, set off by the plainness, almost severity, of her white, tidy little room.

Alix and her father had paused in their wanderings and settled, for a time at least, in a house of sorts, comprising a fair-sized studio and several very small rooms.

Alix entered the little living room where their rather continental breakfast was set out. Her father had already breakfasted and retired to his studio. As she was pouring out her coffee her eye lit on a letter addressed to her in a writing which she recognized as Joyce's, and instantly her bright hopes for Joyce's future were completely

overshadowed, though why she could not tell. She set down the coffee pot hastily and tore open the letter. Joyce said:

"DEAREST ALIX,—I can't and won't stand this any more. It's all too damnable for words. I hate, loathe, detest, and abhor everything and everybody connected with school, and I absolutely refuse to stay here another day. I shall catch the 1.57 to town to-morrow afternoon and go straight home. I expect they will all be perfectly sick at the sight of me, but anything will be better than this. I don't care what anybody says, that's what I shall do. You needn't try to stop me because it won't be any good. I've made up my mind. You will *have* to forgive me, but even if you don't I can't help it. Dear, dear Alix, don't blame me *too* much.

"All love from

"JOYCE."

Alix stood gazing sightlessly at the letter while her little silver watch ticked away two whole minutes. She did not re-read it, but she thought fast and desperately. Suddenly she ran back to her bedroom, seized a hat and coat and left the house. It took her less than five minutes to reach Robert's studio. Robert himself, in a filthy overall, let her in.

"Oh, darling," she said, "what shall I do? Joyce has gone wild, just look at this."

He put an arm round her shoulders and led her into the studio, reading as he went. He read Joyce's letter through several times and handed it back to Alix.

"This is pretty bad," he said at last; "you can't stop her now."

"But, Robin, I *must*," Alix protested in dismay; "she mustn't be allowed to run away. It would be a dreadful thing for her. Suppose I were to wire?"

"She means to come," said Robert; "I don't think a wire will stop her—still, you could try."

"She really cares a lot what I think of her. I think it might be some good."

"It might."

"If only I could get her to wait a bit and then write and explain what a fool's game it is. Or if I could write to her mother—I think if she was leaving at Christmas she would stick it out, but they won't let her know, you know."

"Well, wire to her to wait then, but you'd better do it at once. She means to leave at two, you see."

"Yes," said Alix, "I'll do it now; can you lend me some money?"

"I'll do it, shall I?" he suggested; "you tell me what to say."

"No," said Alix, "I'd better do it, thank you, darling."

She took the money and went out. She wired to Joyce: "For God's sake wait; I should never forgive you—Alix." Then she went back to Robert.

"I have wired," she said, "but I can't be sure that it will stop her."

"You could go and meet her at the station," he suggested

"And make her go back?"

"Yes."

"Yes, I might be able to do that. Or I could go down to Laykington and stop her coming at all."

"Not worth it. That wire may stop her and you'd have to start quite soon if you meant to do that. It would be a frightful amount of trouble for you, and it might be useless after all; she might insist on coming back with you."

"I don't think she would."

"Well, anyway, she might come the next day. I don't

want you to have all that trouble over a—I'd go myself only I don't think I'd be much use."

Alix laughed. "That's very sweet of you, darling," she said, "but you would probably frighten her into a fit and not do any good. I don't mind the trouble—Oh, but I can't, though; Father's got someone coming to lunch, and I must be there to see that the food's eatable and all that. I'll go and meet her at Liverpool Street, that's the thing to do, if she *does* come."

"Shall I come with you?" Robert suggested.

"In case I have to use violence?" she asked with a smile. "I think I'd better go alone, thank you."

Joyce put a few essentials in a suit-case that same morning, and directly after dinner, while everyone was upstairs changing for games, she took her suit-case down to the changing room. She put on her hat and coat, then she walked boldly out of the school, down the drive and away to the station. She had "screwed her courage to the sticking place" with a vengeance. She seemed, now, hardly to know what she was doing. One moment she felt sick with excitement and apprehension, and the next she felt as though she were doing the natural and obvious thing. Her movements seemed entirely mechanical as though her body were aware of her momentous decision and would carry it out without further assistance from her brain.

She arrived at the station and bought her ticket. Being a prefect she was allowed to keep her own money, so that that part of it was easy. As she put her purse back in her pocket it occurred to her that she was probably the only prefect who had ever run away from Laykington.

A white puff of smoke became visible some way down the line. Joyce heard the cry "London train" and the train rushed into the station, the panting roar of the engine getting

slower as it came. It stopped and Joyce got into the first carriage that came to hand, being seized with a sudden panic and feeling that someone might have recognized her at the station. Then, suddenly, her courage failed and she got up and opened the door, but even as she did so she felt that she had gone too far to draw back now, and shut it again. She sat down, saying to herself, "I won't ever go back there, I swear. Never, never, whatever they say. I hate it, and everyone in it. I won't ever see this beastly station again. I won't ever, ever come back any more." Even then she rose again and put her hand on the door handle, but the train was moving out of the station now, moving quite fast. Joyce hesitated a moment and sat down again.

Her thoughts on that memorable journey were very far from pleasant. She pictured herself arriving at home and being greeted with horror and dismay. They might even try to send her straight back to school; but, do what they might, she was determined not to go. She took Alix's telegram out of her pocket and re-read it "For God's sake wait; I should never forgive you." What Alix said was probably true—she might not forgive her. That thought was so shattering that Joyce wished, for a moment, that she had waited. But she had had to come. She had come to the end of her tether, and the only thing to do was to break away, the only thing, as she saw it.

She had moments of feeling wonderfully free, as though she had risen up and cast off her chains; but in between she felt so apprehensive that she would sing under her breath or repeat poetry to herself to keep herself from thinking too coherently. That journey seemed to her to take a terrible time. She had, in imagination, not only reached Liverpool Street but also Victoria and Stonebridge a hundred times

before the train puffed leisurely into the station and she had accomplished the first stage of her journey. As she walked along the platform she was thinking, " I suppose I had better go to Victoria by Tube. Do I have to change? I can't remember. Bother; I suppose I shall have to ask."

She gave up her ticket and started off towards the mouth of the Underground, and then she saw Alix. It was with a feeling of acute horror that she recognized her and wondered if she could slip into the Underground without being noticed. She looked the other way and quickened her pace. How unlucky that Alix should just be at this place at this time. Really, you would think you might go up to town without instantly meeting everyone you had ever known! She had forgotten that she had told Alix what train she was taking; in fact she had very little idea of what she had said in that letter. She had not dared to read it through. She had nearly reached the entrance to the Metropolitan Railway and was hoping that she had evaded Alix when an arm was slipped through hers and she felt herself to be taken prisoner.

Alix guided her out of the station, talking all the time in hasty undertones.

" Don't think I don't understand," she said. " I do; I understand all too well, but it simply won't do."

Joyce, who had expected her to be hard and cold, was greatly relieved to find how mistaken she had been.

" But, Alix, you don't know what I've been through."

" I don't," Alix admitted; " but I can guess. Things have suddenly got very much worse till you felt that everybody was your deadly enemy, and so you made up your mind that you could stand no more. It's an awful blow to me, your coming like this, but I do understand, I do—I dare say I should have done the same myself, but you mustn't."

" I tried," said Joyce hopelessly; " you don't know how I tried."

" Oh, I know you tried—but you must do more than try, you must succeed."

" But, Alix, you don't know how awful it was. I told you I wasn't doing much good as a pre. Well, I wasn't; it was worse than I told you. The thing was, I used to have to do guarding on Wednesday evenings in the dorms. They were pretty bad the first Wednesday; they made a pretty good noise, I mean; and they were always getting out of bed; but I managed to keep them under to some extent and I got them quieted in the end. But last time it was frightful—far worse than anything we ever did when I was in the dorms. It was the day of the Ennsfield match and so, of course, everyone was awfully excited, and they were let off half an hour of prep. to see the end, and that made them worse, and then we won, first time for four years, you know, and they got fairly wild. It was the last straw. And so, in the dorms that night they were perfectly awful; they didn't seem to mind getting marks, they didn't seem to mind anything. Even when I threatened to report them, all they did was to shout at me that they weren't doing anything and I ' might not,' and all the rest of it. And then that little hell-hound, Olivia Heaton, started in. I heard her talking, and so I barged along and told her to shut up, and she said she wasn't talking, which was a lie because I know she was; and everything she said she tried to imitate my voice and the others all began to laugh. Then someone clapped, and then everyone began clapping, and I didn't know *what* to do! I shouted at them to shut up or I would report the whole dorm, and they quieted down a bit, and then Olivia said, ' Be silent, my children ' in a voice that was meant to be like

mine, and they all burst into a perfect roar of laughter. I didn't really sound a bit like my voice, but they seemed to think it did, and they fairly shrieked. Oh, it was awful! I yelled myself hoarse trying to shut them up. Then Olivia shouted out 'You really must control yourselves, girls. Any noise you make may be used against you,' and they shouted, 'Go it, Olly,'" and I said they'd all be reported, but they didn't take the slightest notice, and just as the hell-hound was making another fatuous remark, in walked Matron! Oh, my God!" Joyce paused with a look of acute horror on her face.

"And then?"

"Well, of course, there was dead silence directly, and Matron pretty well jawed me in front of the kids; imagine it, with them all listening. How could I ever make them obey me after that? Well, then she told me to send up somebody who could keep silence in the dorms; so I went down, and the only pre. I could find was Laura, so I had to send her. I just told her there'd been a row and Matron was up there, but Matron told her the rest, as much as she knew.

"And after that everything was perfect hell.

"West sent for me and said I couldn't go on being a pre. unless I got better jolly soon, and the pres. were mostly pretty awful about it; they didn't say anything much, but they just sort of—I don't know. They just made me feel awful, somehow, and Laura—Oh, Lord, Alix, you can't think what it was like! It was absolute hell on earth; and so, you see, I had to come away."

Having told her story Joyce remained silent with flushed face and clenched hands, so deeply preoccupied that she was hardly aware of anything outside her own thoughts. Alix remained outwardly calm, only frowning a little and deeply

thoughtful also. All the time that Joyce had been talking they had been walking rapidly away from the station. Alix now turned Joyce towards the station again and they went on walking in the same way.

At last she spoke:

"It was vile of them to treat you like that, they must be a pretty rotten lot this term, if they really meant it. But it doesn't justify your running away; you've let them have an easy victory, let them laugh at you and drive you out. They've had the last word, so far; but you must go back and show them you are master. It isn't long, only five weeks now, but it's long enough to show them you're not what they thought."

"Go back?" said Joyce slowly. "But they'll know I ran away. I can't go back. Just think how they'll despise me. I can't go back, Alix."

"You can and must go back. They won't have missed you yet. There's a train in about ten minutes. If you go back by that, no one will know you've been away. They won't miss you at tea. No one will know. You can get back and start afresh and do wonders. I know you can. If you run away you brand yourself as a failure. You'll be sorry always, always—and so shall I. Now, go back and show them what you're made of. Boss them all over the place. Give them a really bad time in that dormitory—they'll soon learn. It'll do them nothing but good. That train goes in seven minutes; will you go?"

Joyce was no fighter, but the fire of battle leapt in her veins.

"Yes," she said. "I'll go—Oh, give me that suit-case; have you been carrying it all the time? Oh, Alix, I *am* sorry; I never thought about it!"

"Nor did I," Alix answered truthfully. "We'll go and

get your ticket, shall we?" They were just re-entering the station.

They found the train waiting, and Joyce deposited her suit-case in a corner seat and waited with Alix on the platform.

"I *won't* go back after this once," she exclaimed suddenly.

"I'm sure if your people knew how you hated it they *would* let you leave, you know," Alix answered thoughtfully.

"I suppose they might."

"They *don't* know then?"

"No, not exactly."

"Why ever don't you tell them?"

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Oh, they wouldn't understand. They'd think I was making a fuss about nothing and—well, I can't tell any of them what it's really like, I don't know why, I just can't somehow."

"You're wrong about them not understanding," said Alix with conviction; "they *would* understand, I'm sure, if you would only explain properly, and then they would let you leave."

"No," Joyce answered, with a doleful shake of the head. "But I won't go back, all the same, unless I'm taken there in chains—and even then I won't stay."

"No," Alix said decidedly, "you won't go back—look out, it's going to start."

Joyce got into the train.

"Remember," said Alix, standing up on the step," you want confidence—believe in yourself——"

She jumped down as the train began to move. In the confused noise that followed Joyce could see her lips move and knew that she was saying good-bye.

"Good-bye," said Joyce quietly, "Good-bye, Alix." She saw Alix turn and walk away as the train slid out of the station again—back to Laykington! "Oh God——!"

Alix rushed back to Robert's studio and collapsed on a heap of drapery with her face in her hands.

"She's gone back," she said, "but, oh! it is hard for her, Robin. She's so young; it's awful to see her up against these problems."

"Dearest child," he answered, "they are only the problems of a schoolgirl."

But Alix shook her head.

"No," she said, "the problems of life."

XXIII

JOYCE reappeared at Laykington in the course of the evening. No one had missed her and no one saw her come back. Everything was just as it had been. Everything but Joyce herself. She now made a great effort to make things better, and above all to do better as a prefect. And, slowly and painfully, as the term went on, she gained ground, fighting every inch.

The next Wednesday evening was not at all bad, though Joyce had been dreading it terribly. But this was owing rather to Joyce's luck than to her skill. Olivia Heaton had toothache and was extremely suppressed, even tearful, in consequence. From time to time she broke out into loud lamentations and expressed a desire for false teeth, but on the whole she was fairly passive. When she complained of her toothache the others said "Poor old Olly!", "Cheer up!" and "It is rotten luck," for she was popular among her contemporaries. They also implored Joyce to go and comfort her, which Joyce was most reluctant to do. Once when Joyce did go to try to quiet Olivia, during one of her outbreaks, she noticed a photograph of Laura on the dressing-table.

"What on earth has she got that for?" Joyce wondered. "She surely can't be keen on Laura!"

It was very typical of Laura, looking very square-shouldered and cheerful, in a very square tunic, and holding a 'crosse.

" Leave my photo alone! " Olivia exclaimed passionately, seeing Joyce looking at it. " Leave it alone, you old hag! " and she seized the photograph off the dressing-table and took it into her bed. Joyce hastily left her cubicle. Later that same evening Olivia called Joyce and, when she went to her cubicle, apologized with tears for having called her an " old hag," and half persuaded, half compelled Joyce to kiss her good night. She was a funny child, but seeing how she enjoyed a real welter of sentimentalism it was a mistake, Joyce thought, to have chosen Laura to adore. She would get very little change out of Laura, Joyce well knew.

When Olivia had recovered from her toothache she was as troublesome as ever. She had made a habit of imitating Joyce's voice because of the success of her first attempts, and she never forgot that awful evening and constantly repeated the witticisms she had employed to such effect then.

Often as she passed her in a passage Joyce would hear her say to her companion something about any noise she made being used against her. Joyce knew well enough that the child was deliberately trying to annoy her, but she could not see any way of dealing with her and so adopted the defensive and totally useless plan of pretending not to hear. She was just beginning to feel thoroughly miserable again when she received a most surprising letter from her mother:

" Darling Joyce,—I am afraid that you are really unhappy at school. I had hoped that your wanting to leave was only a passing phase, but it seems to me now that you really are unhappy, and of course it is no good making you stay on if you feel like that about it.

" Daddy and I are both very sorry because, as you know, we wanted you to stay on until the end of the year, but we think now that it will be best for you to leave and so I have written to your head-mistress about it."

After this followed some news of home. The Wellburoughs were giving a dance on Boxing night; the housemaid was leaving to get married; and so on. There was nothing more about Joyce, no adequate reason for their sudden change of mind. Joyce had begged and begged, all the term, to be allowed to leave; and now, quite suddenly and without any special urging, they had agreed. That her mother should change like that seemed strange enough; but that her father should—it was past her comprehension. Joyce was completely at a loss to account for this miracle, until, a few days later. She got a letter from Dick which made it, in a flash, quite plain to her.

"I hear you are to be allowed to leave at Christmas after all!" he said, "I thought you'd probably get your own way sooner or later. Congratulations."

After that came a little about what he'd been doing, and then:

"I was home last week-end and a friend of yours turned up on Saturday, Miss Somebody—I've forgotten her name. A jolly pretty girl she was, anyway, fair and shingled, with most marvellous eyes. Do you know the girl I mean?"—Did she know!—"You do know what's what in the way of looks, I must say. She was a fascinating little thing, rather, but terribly solemn and quiet and all that. I was only in to tea and she went directly after, so I didn't see much of her. I suppose she thought you were at home, otherwise there doesn't seem much point in her dropping in like that."

The explanation was almost more amazing than the fact. It took Joyce some minutes to realize it properly. So Alix had been to Stonebridge and had talked her people over to letting her leave! Just think of Alix taking all that trouble just for her! Joyce was amazed. How could Alix have done all that just for her? But she had. She must have,

It was the obvious explanation. She looked at Dick's letter again. So Alix was " rather a fascinating little thing " and " a jolly pretty girl," was she? That was all Dick knew! But it was true enough as far as it went, all the same. It struck her as funny then that Dick should be so much attracted both by Alix and by Nita, those two that were so very different; but, far stranger than that, she remembered, was her own case.

Joyce wrote enthusiastically to Alix to thank her for all she had done. Alix wrote back saying, of course, that it was nothing, and adding, surprisingly, that she was so glad Joyce did not mind and had been afraid she might resent her interference. So much so, indeed, that she had asked Mrs. Aylmer not to mention her. " Resent it! " said Joyce. " What a notion! "

Joyce was making enormous efforts to get " the kids " under her control before the end of the term. She would even sacrifice herself to the extent of taking extra preps. or " guarding " when it was not her turn. One evening, when Laura was particularly rushed with her own work, Joyce actually offered, in her zeal, to " take prep." instead of her, for half the time, and Laura accepted thankfully. Joyce " took prep." pretty successfully that evening, and when Laura came to relieve her she found the prep. room completely silent and orderly. She cast an approving glance round, murmured her thanks to Joyce, and took up her position.

Joyce's great efforts were greatly rewarded. She improved rapidly and was soon quite an average prefect. She still had a good deal of trouble with Olivia, but Olivia was a problem to all but the strongest.

A few evenings later, during prep. time, Joyce had to take a list to Jean Harris, the head of the house. As Jean was

not in her study and there was nobody there but Laura, who shared it with her, Joyce left the list on Jean's desk for her to find when she returned.

"Joyce," said Laura without looking up, as Joyce was about to leave the room.

"Hullo," said Joyce, one hand on the door handle.

"You——" Laura hesitated, "you're managing the kids much better."

"Charming of you to say so."

"You had a bit of a—bother," Laura went on, ignoring Joyce's last remark; "I'm glad you've come on so."

"Are you?" Joyce remarked impassively, and turned to go.

"Wait a sec," said Laura. "I helped to make things more—difficult, didn't I?"

"You!" said Joyce contemptuously; "As if I cared what *you* did."

"Well, you did care."

"Very obliging of you to tell me how I feel!"

"Will you not be a fool!" Laura exclaimed impatiently. "I treated you badly, and I'm sorry—that's all."

Joyce was silent. What could she say? Up to the last moment she had believed Laura to be triumphing in what she had done, and here she was apologizing—Laura!—it was unbelievable!

"Oh!" she said at last, "don't—er—don't bother—I mean——" She paused. Laura went on:

"I always had a bit of a down on you, you know, ever since you chucked us. That always did annoy me more than anything. I never had any patience with José after she went, but she always was rather a fool. I should think she's gone with practically everyone in the house since she went with us. I wouldn't have her back for anything—but you're different; you're a jolly plucky kid."

"Kid, am I!"

"Well, you know what I mean. Woman, if you prefer it."

After a slight pause Laura spoke again.

"Of course, Nita hated us like poison."

"Of course," Joyce agreed; "She always said you were too 'healthy.'"

Laura laughed. "I'd rather be healthy than like her, any day!" she said. "Oh, sorry, I forgot she was your friend."

"She was," said Joyce slowly.

"Oh, well—of course we—Bess and I, I mean—we simply——"

There were giggles outside in the passage and Olivia's shrill voice reached them. "Any noise you make may be used against you, Pongo, remember!" Laura was up and out of the door in a flash.

"Olivia, come here!"

Sound of two pairs of feet returning.

"Go on, Vera, I don't want you," said Laura. "Olivia, why were you talking?"

"I hardly spoke at all; honestly, Laura, I only said one word!"

"I heard what you said," Laura answered sternly, "that's not the point, you had no business to be speaking here at all during prep., had you?"

"Well——"

"Had you?"

"N-no."

"No. Well, go along; you'll have to be put down for that, of course."

"Oh, Laura—I was trying to be good this week."

"You don't seem to be trying very hard."

"Oh, but I——"

" Be quiet and hurry up into the prep. room," Laura came back into the study.

" Oh, that child! " said Joyce expressively.

" Has she been bothering you? "

" M'm."

" Imitating your voice, or what? "

" M'm."

" That's a great trick of hers just now," said Laura thoughtfully; " something should be done about it."

" Oh, by the way, is she keen on you? "

" Lord no! why? "

" She's got your photo on her dressing-table."

" She hasn't! "

" She has."

" Ye Gods! How jolly for me! " Laura laughed. " Well then, perhaps if I tick her off she'll notice a bit. Oh, and perhaps she'll go off me, too, that's rather a scheme! "

" Not she," said Joyce, " she'll enjoy it. Well, I've got some work to do, good-bye."

Next Wednesday when Joyce went up to guard she found things pretty quiet. She had a look at the " Blue " dormitory first, then turned her attention to the " Green." Directly she appeared Olivia demanded loudly that she should go and say good night to her, but Joyce refused to do so. Olivia protested:

" Oh, *please*, Joyce, you *might*!—I want to speak to you specially—it's most frightfully important—honestly it is! Joyce, you might come."

Joyce went into Olivia's cubicle.

" Just a minute then," she said.

Olivia looked very solemn.

" I've got to apologize," she began.

"Oh?" said Joyce, greatly taken aback.

"Yes," Olivia replied impressively.

Joyce wanted to laugh, but realized that it wouldn't be quite the thing For once in a way the child didn't mean to be funny. To laugh now would be to offend her for ever.

"Well?" Joyce said, "what for?"

"Well, for ragging you, you know."

"Who said you were to?"

"Laura."

"Did she? Oh."

"I wouldn't have done it for anyone else," Olivia volunteered.

"M'm," said Joyce. "You like her, don't you?"

"Yes, I love her, I'm keen on her you know—really, I'm awfully far gone."

"What a quaint way the kid has of expressing herself," thought Joyce.

"Then it might last almost to the end of the term?" she suggested cynically.

"Oh, *more* than that!" Olivia assured her. "I think she's *wonderful*! You know, I'm working most awfully hard at 'crosse, on purpose to please her."

"That's a good idea."

"Yes, isn't it? I was playing in the excel house game yesterday, you know, and she came and coached us, and she said I was coming on and I must practise hard, so I think she was pleased."

"Yes," said Joyce. "I expect she was."

"'Cause she gave me no end of a jaw, before, you know, for slacking in house games—that was partly why I got keen on her," she added naïvely.

It occurred to Joyce what a different effect a very similar event had had on her.

She told Laura, afterwards, what Olivia had said about 'crosse.

"Oh, that's it, is it?" said Laura. "I noticed she was playing better yesterday, but she was slacking like anything a week or two ago."

"She said she got keen on you because you jawed her about slacking!"

They both laughed.

"By way of revenge, I suppose," said Laura. "Oh, by the way, did she apologize to you?"

"Yes—thanks."

"Good kid," said Laura. "I hope she'll behave herself now."

And she did behave herself very well, to Joyce at least.

And afterwards things were much easier for Joyce. Laura now helped rather than hindered her, and Olivia was much less difficult. Guarding was almost pleasant, sometimes, now.

It was now that Joyce really began to try to get on in lacrosse, and Laura, seeing this, used to go out with her before morning chapel sometimes, and coach her. Joyce worked so strenuously that before the end of the term she was promoted to the third twelve and even came in for a real match!

Also she was now beyond the reach of Phyllis Gregory or any such annoyances. As a prefect she hardly came in contact with such people at all, and she had, of course, her own study, instead of having to work in the senior prep. room. Quite suddenly everything seemed to have become much easier and much nicer; and, looking back, Joyce saw that this improvement in everything had begun when she returned from town, after her attempt to escape. She remembered that, at the time, the whole thing had seemed

rather a fiasco, and she had even regretted the waste of money. But she saw now that she had got her money's worth out of that journey over and over again.

A great event was now approaching—house matches. It was a wonderful moment for Joyce when she realized that she would have to play for her house. It took her a little time to get used to the idea, but when she did, and more especially when Laura pointed it out to her, she began practising very hard, in all the spare time she could get, which was little enough, since she was taking the certificate at Christmas. Joyce's house, known as Blaire's in memory of its first house-mistress, could collect quite a strong twelve, having three people in the first school twelve, and four in the second.

Joyce was desperately nervous on the first day of house matches, when her house was to play against Wood's. The vice-captain of the first twelve was in Wood's, which gave their team a formidable air, though otherwise it was not particularly strong. After dinner, on that memorable day, Laura had gathered the house twelve together in the senior sitting-room, for her last words.

"We're *going* to win," she told them; "we've simply got to. Of course we all know that, but still, I thought I'd remind you! Our defences are our weakest point," she went on—Joyce was a defence—"remember to *mark* your men, defences, and *don't be afraid to tackle*—of course I know you're not really afraid, but don't *look* as if you were!"

Joyce dressed with the greatest care in her shortest games-tunic and her longest stockings, and did her hair most carefully; not, for once, to look well, but to keep out of her eyes! And after all that, it was a most uninteresting match and an easy victory for Blaire's. But there was plenty of excitement before them. Austin's had beaten Lanes'

that afternoon—as everyone had foreseen they would—and Blaire's would therefore have to meet Austin's in the next match.

Next day, however, the excel semi-finals were played. Blaire's played Lane's and beat them 5—4, largely owing to the amazing efforts of Olivia. Joyce saw Laura go and speak to her afterwards, and Olivia came as near blushing as was possible for anyone so naturally brazen, and looked very happy.

The day after that was *the* day—the day of the first house finals, and the whole school turned out to watch. Even if they had not been interested they would all have come, just for the joy of making as much noise as they could without getting into trouble for it; but they were all interested, they were enormously interested, and the houses concerned were at boiling point.

Joyce had a terrible " match pain " all morning and felt sick, just as she used to before she became hardened to rows. By the time she arrived on the field, however, she was feeling better. Laura went among them scattering words of wisdom and encouragement to the best of her ability until it was time for them to take their places.

Joyce stood at cover point, wishing that the defences were not so weak and wondering what sort of a fool she would make of herself, and then the whistle blew. For some time Joyce had nothing to do but watch, while the game proceeded at the other end of the field. But when the ball did come down to her end, it was the captain of Austin's (and of the school) who brought it, Joyce dashed out to tackle her, but she passed Joyce in a flash and scored a goal. They had only been playing six minutes and Austin's had a goal. After that Blaire's got a goal, and then Austin's got another, gained by their captain in exactly the same way as before.

And then, just as Joyce was beginning to feel tired, the whistle blew for half-time. Joyce and the rest of her side gathered together, thankfully, to suck lemons and talk and rest. Laura encouraged them, and the rest and the lemons encouraged them, and they returned to the battle greatly refreshed.

After some time Laura shot a goal and the scores were equal again—two all. After that Austin's twelve really put their backs into it. Centre, their captain, came down to Joyce's end like a cyclone, terribly irresistible. Joyce ran out, too late, to tackle her, and she passed to second home before Joyce reached her. A few moments later second home shot a goal. Joyce was beginning to feel tired again now, but far worse than that was the feeling of failure which was creeping over her, failure past and to come. Three times Austin's captain had come down with the ball, three times Joyce had tried, and failed, to tackle her, and three times a goal had been shot as the result. Three goals Austin's had got, for every one of which Joyce felt herself directly responsible.

The crowd on the banks shouted and shouted—"Austin's—Austin's—Blaire's—Austin's."

The game was up at the other end of the field for some time and Joyce was thankful to rest her aching legs. Then Bess shot a goal and Blaire's supporters taxed their hoarse throats to congratulate her suitably. The noise was unmusical, but sincere and loud. Once again they lined up and waited for the draw. Once again the ball started off towards Austin's goal, and once again Austin's captain got hold of it somehow and bore down on Blaire's defences seeming irresistible as fate. She was past third man in a moment, but Joyce had learnt something from her bitter experience and dashed out instantly to tackle her. She felt terribly

small and inadequate and terribly nervous, as she faced that popular heroine, the captain of the first twelve. But she knew point to be even less adequate; she knew that if she failed there would be another goal for Austin's. But, amazingly, she did not fail. Her opponent saw her coming and prepared to pass, but even as she did so Joyce struck her 'crosse and the pass fell short. Considerable scuffling ensued, the ball was flicked out behind the goal, and the goal-keeper dashed out after it. Joyce was horrified at such a piece of rashness. Point was also behind and Joyce was left nearest to the goal, in a frightful suspense. She saw Austin's first man get the ball and pass over the goal to third man. In a moment Joyce had hurled herself between the goal posts and waited, sick with fear. The ball came high and to one side. Anyone who knew anything about keeping goal would have tried to catch it in her 'crosse, even Joyce would have tried to if she had had her wits about her. But she had no time to think and she sprang in front of the ball. She felt a stunning blow on her head, saw everything go black and shaky, stood for some moments holding onto the goal post, then slithered to the ground.

The extraordinary thing was, as Joyce heard afterwards, that no one noticed, at the moment, what had happened. When the ball came out, point seized it and sent it right up the field to Laura, and Laura scored a goal, and that was just on time. It was all over in a flash, and so, when the others had time to think of anything but the game, they found Joyce lying limply between her own goal posts with first home and the goal-keeper trying to restore her. They half helped, half carried her into the house and took her to her own room, where she lay down. A large lump had already appeared on her head and was increasing every moment. But they had won; so what did it matter? " Now I'm a real

schoolgirl!" she thought, as they pulled off her muddy 'crosse boots and covered her with an eider-down. "How sick Nita would have been." She laughed. "It isn't as bad as I thought—shut up, blast you!" (this to her head)—"but I'm not sorry I'm leaving. It's fun all right, but there isn't much in it, when all's said and done!"

Yet, on the field, she had felt like one inspired by the spirit of war, to fight, if necessary, to the death.

She remembered the feeling and smiled.

"I was a real schoolgirl," she thought again. "Little things, fairly little things, seem so vast at school."

After that match Joyce was quite a heroine in her house. It was one of the biggest surprises of her life, and one of the pleasantest, to find how popular she had become in a few hours. Laura and Joyce were considered by the rest of the house to be responsible for the victory; Laura because she had played quite exceptionally well, and Joyce because she had saved the situation, at a crucial moment, in a most spectacular manner. And they had both been hurt. Laura had been hacked above one eye and bore the traces of it till the end of the term, for all the world to see and admire.

XXIV

BY this time the term was really coming to an end, and Christmas loomed large on the horizon once more. A very queer term it had been for Joyce, and, on the whole, a very unhappy one. But now it was ending, and the end was wonderfully bright. Everyone knew, now, that she was leaving. People kept asking her what she was going to do, and she had not the faintest idea. She had said that she would think about it during the term, and she had thought about it often, but no inspiration had come to her. She had no more idea, now, what she wanted to do than she had had when she first came to school; in fact, she had less. When she first came she had an idea that she could rest from her labours and do nothing when she left; now that pleasant illusion had been shattered and nothing had taken its place.

She took school certificate again that term, and passed it too, though she did not hear that till later. It did not seem nearly so formidable the second time, and Joyce felt more resigned; there was less panic about.

As the term drew to a close people steadily became more noisy and less obedient. Joyce remembered having gone through the process herself often, before she was a prefect. She was not worried by it now; it was just as bad for the other prefects as it was for her, and anyway she was leaving in a few days, and, after all, it *was* the end of the term.

They were going home on Tuesday, and on Friday evening Miss Whitburn sent for Joyce. Always before,

when Joyce had entered that study, she had been in disgrace, and even now she could not help feeling that "Whitty" would be angry with her for leaving if she could think of nothing worse. To suppress this fear Joyce told herself, "If you've been good, they get terribly moved and weep and so on; they don't get angry" But then, she thought, "I'd rather she was furious than sloppy—and, anyway, I haven't been good. If you're not good they're glad to get rid of you; so I expect she'll be very genial."

At this point Miss Whitburn came in, putting an end to Joyce's conjectures. She was distinctly genial.

"Ah," thought Joyce, "I was right; she is glad, and I don't blame her either."

"Sit down, Joyce," she said, taking a chair herself. And Joyce sat, feeling very awkward.

Miss Whitburn said a lot about how sad it was when people left, and what a pity it seemed that Joyce should leave so young, and asked what she was going to do, to which Joyce replied that she hadn't quite decided yet. Then suddenly she said:

"You found your work as a prefect very difficult at first, didn't you?—I expect there were plenty of times when you felt you would have liked to give it up altogether."

"Yes," said Joyce, "there were."

"But you came through all right, didn't you? I expect it was rather an effort, but I think you will agree with me now that it was worth it. You got on very well afterwards. I congratulate you."

"Oh, it wasn't me——" said Joyce. "I—I gave it up only—someone——" she hesitated.

"Someone helped you?"

"Yes." Joyce noticed that you could see the carpet either as a blue pattern on a green background or as a green

pattern on a blue background. She seemed deeply absorbed in the discovery.

"Well, I'm very glad. But still I think most of the credit is due to you."

"No, really, it was all Alix's doing. She was my friend, you know."

"Was?"

"She left."

"I know; but surely——"

"She is still, really, of course; but I don't often see her."

"I see. And she helped you. She's been a prefect herself, and a very useful prefect she was. We were very sorry to lose her."

"Yes," said Joyce.

"She writes to you, does she?"

"Yes——" Should she tell her? An impulse moved her to it—but perhaps it was better not. "Yes," she repeated stupidly, "she writes to me."

"She saved you from being expelled last term. I suppose you know that?"

"Yes."

"She was very wise for her age. Well, Joyce, I shall be sorry to lose you. I must admit I was very doubtful about making you a prefect, but I thought it would be the best thing for you. You have shown me that it was not only the best thing for you, but the best thing for the school."

"I'm afraid I haven't done the school much good," said Joyce.

"More than you think, probably. Don't be gloomy about it; you have done your part. I hope you will be glad of the memory of school, not sorry. After all, you made one real friend, and that is worth a great deal of unhappiness."

"Yes," said Joyce. She seemed as though she would

have said more, but changed her mind. Miss Whitburn waited a moment, then went on:

"Well, Joyce, I hope you will do something worth doing, and be as happy as—well, as you can! You must come down here and see us often. Don't forget your old friends. I won't keep you now; I shall hope to see you again quite soon. We shall always be glad to see you any time. Good-bye."

On Saturday Miss Western sent for Joyce and gave her a "leaving jaw"—but that was a very different affair. Joyce had no temptation to say more than she might care to remember afterwards. She was more bored than anything else.

And after that came Sunday.

When a girl loves school and is sorry to leave, the thing about it that she dreads most is the last Sunday. Joyce was neither fond of school nor sorry to leave, and yet, because of the carol service she dreaded it as much as any of them.

Early service and morning chapel were perhaps a little unsettling, but nothing serious—in fact, morning service would have been perfectly all right if they had not had that hymn about—

> "*Gone are the labours, the joy and the sorrow;*
> *Lo, at the end we draw near to adore.*"

It is a well-known fact that it takes a strong constitution to stand this last test—but Joyce stood it. It was not the hymns that she was afraid of, but the carols.

On Sunday afternoon Joyce went down to the shore, all alone. She remembered her last walk with Alix—less than five months ago, yet it seemed like years. All the time that she was on the beach she was haunted by the feeling that Alix might appear at any moment from behind

a rock or round the corner of the cliffs, or that if she had arrived a moment sooner, or could stay a little later, she might see her. Once some sound of the wind or the waves made her start and turn, thinking she heard a footstep. For what seemed many minutes she stood quite still, holding her breath and listening—until it was clear that there was no one there.

But in chapel that evening the feeling was stronger still. Alix was so closely connected with the carol service, in Joyce's mind, and everything about the chapel and the service stimulated this idea of her nearness. Once, even, Joyce turned right round and gazed back at the dark seats under the gallery, and at the gallery itself. During the whole service she kept wanting to make a thorough search of the chapel, but a prefect can't keep turning round like that, even if she is leaving. It sets such a bad example.

Joyce could not now remember anything at all about the carol service they had had the year before. All the carols they had at this last service seemed to be the ones they had had three years ago. Lovely, happy carols; how Alix would have enjoyed them! They were so reminiscent of her that Joyce almost began to fancy she heard her voice singing them, in fact, the fancy grew so strongly on her that she glanced round once or twice, almost involuntarily.

José sang a solo. She had rather a nice singing voice in these days—"And doesn't she know it!" people said. "Oh, well," thought Joyce, "if you have something to be proud of you may as well be proud of it. I never had much temptation in that way." She was in the mood to make allowances for people.

There were so few days now between them and the actual day of Christmas, and those few days would be so packed with every kind of excitement and happiness. That was

how people in general felt at the carol service, how Joyce had felt each year for the last three years. But she felt differently now. This was the end, the very end of her school life, and she was too much taken up with looking back to be able to look forward, even if it was only for seven days. She was thinking what a mess she had made of everything and how much better she would manage it if she could have it over again.

Somebody was singing "Tryste Noël"; not so well as Alix used to—but it was terribly reminiscent all the same. Joyce remembered how she had thought of its sadness as being the sadness which she always felt to be latent in Alix. It did not seem like that now. It was the sadness of her own loss and her own sickening waste of time—more than a year she had wasted so, a year that should have been the happiest time of all, and she had made of it a bitter memory, a time that she wished unlived. . . . That was the sorrow of "Tryste Noël" at this last of services, that was its meaning for her now.

> "*But would to-night my tears were there*
> *Between her bosom and his hair.*"

Always those lines had haunted Joyce, ever since the first time she had heard Alix sing them. They were the two last lines. The solo was over and everyone was singing "O come all ye faithful."

Then that was over too, and they were all pouring out into the frosty moonlight night Directly they were out of the chapel door their tongues were unloosed. As they crossed the moonlit strip of gravel outside the chapel and went in at the big door of the school they were talking altogether, talking and laughing, all but Joyce. From every direction disjointed bits of conversation came to her:

" I thought José got on jolly well, didn't you? "

" Oh, my dear, what *do* you think I've gone and done? "

" Oh, well, of course, you're quite mad; but I say, wasn't it topping when they did that thing—you know—that thing about—Oh, how *does* it go?—about angels or something, you know! "

Joyce did not, but then she was not the person addressed. She walked on, surrounded by all those chattering, laughing children, feeling strangely isolated, gazing dumbly at the moonlit faces, moonlit gravel, moonlit playing-fields—familiar things transformed to romance and ghostliness. She passed through the big door to the crude matter-of-factness of electric light, half along the passage; and then an unaccountable impulse made her extricate herself from that human river and struggle back to the door again, keeping close against the wall. Unnoticed, she slipped out of the great door and across the gravel to the place by the side of the chapel where she had stood once and waited for Alix in the bitter cold. It was cold to-night, too, and the moon was shining, as it had then. Oh, why, why had she wasted her opportunities? She turned back to the school. Outside the door she stopped again to look back at the playing fields all soaked in moonlight, the peaceful sleeping trees, and the chapel. . . . Someone was standing on the steps of the chapel, looking at the moon. As Joyce watched her she raised one hand and pulled off her hat. Her fair hair shone like silver in the moonlight and for one second Joyce stood like stone and gazed at it—then she sprang forward.

" Alix! "

Alix started and turned.

" Oh, there you are," she murmured. " Isn't this fun? "

" Alix, were you in chapel? "

" Yes."

"In the gallery?"

"Yes."

"Ah," said Joyce, "I knew you were somewhere about!"

"Well, I'm glad you came to look for me—or wasn't that what you came for?"

"Yes, it was for that, but I nearly didn't, and then I shouldn't have seen you. Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"I don't know, I didn't think of it till this morning. I just—just suddenly thought I should like to—come."

"You should have come and seen me before chapel," said Joyce.

"I didn't arrive till about six, and then I went and looked at the sea, just for a second, and then I came up here and it was practically chapel time. Anyway, I didn't want to go into the house to look for you. An Old Girl is so conspicuous. I didn't want to see the others. I was really afraid to go, and besides— —"

"Besides, what?"

"Nothing—only—I thought I'd let you do the finding."

"But I might not have come."

"But you did come!"

"But I awfully easily mightn't have."

"Oh, it's no good worrying about what might have happened. You might have died before the end of the service!"

"Yes," said Joyce, "I might. I very nearly did."

"It was lovely, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was; but I wish you had sung the last solo instead of Pam. It isn't itself somehow unless you sing it. I'd give anything to hear you sing it again."

"You need not," said Alix, and she sang it there and then to Joyce in the moonlight, and to Joyce only.

When Alix ended they both stood silent for a moment. Then—

"I must go. I've got a train," said Alix.

"Are you going back *to-night*?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Alix!"

"Will you walk as far as the gate with me?—Oh, no, you'll be late for supper, Joyce, fly!"

"No," said Joyce. "I shan't go in to supper. It won't matter, practically the last night and everything. Anyway, I'm not going."

They walked slowly down to the gate, but when they reached it Joyce found that she could not turn back and leave Alix there, and so they walked on together to the station.

"Just think," said Joyce. "I'm leaving on Tuesday, thanks to you, and I *have* made such a mess of it all!"

"Nonsense."

"Oh, Alix, I *have*. I wasted more than a year when I might have been, should have been, having a nice time; really nice, I mean."

"You think that was wasted," Alix answered. "I admit I thought so myself at the time, but now that I see how you've come out of it I don't know. It may save you wasting more time later, more valuable time, perhaps."

"What more valuable time could there be? Think what fun we should have had if only I hadn't been such a fool!"

"Perhaps," Alix answered. "But what's the good of thinking of it now? We had some very good times as it was. You mustn't expect too much."

"What made you come to-day?" Joyce asked suddenly.

"I don't know, just an impulse."

"Goodness, was that all? How we do depend on impulses,

Isn't it terrifying to think of? It's all so precarious. It was only through an impulse that I came back to look for you."

"It is precarious," Alix answered, "and since it is so we may or may not meet again."

"But I shan't forget you."

"No," said Alix, "we shall remember each other." And with that they walked into the station. They waited in silence for the train. It came and they said good-bye to each other.

"Perhaps we shall see each other again quite soon," said Joyce.

"Perhaps we shall," said Alix. "I hope so."

And so they parted, and Joyce, sick at heart, watched the train grow smaller and smaller in the distance.

Then she turned slowly and walked out of the station. But once she was out in the road the pang of parting passed away and left her very happy so that she ran, wildly, blindly, not thinking where she was going, yet somehow going the right way. She clenched her hands and ran and ran and kept on murmuring, "I'm too happy to live, too happy to live!" without knowing in the least why she was happy.

On Tuesday morning she suffered another parting pang, watching the clock tower vanish among the trees, as she sat in one of the chars-à-bancs which always carried them to the station on the last morning, although, on other days, it was barely ten minutes' walk.

"I shall never go back," she thought; "I know I shan't. There has been too much that I want to forget, mixed up with all I want to remember."

At the station many hands seized hers and many voices wished her good-bye and good luck. Some even said that she must write to them, and she answered vaguely, "Oh, rather," knowing that she never would, and doubting, even,

if they really meant it. Anyway, it was nice of them to pretend to be sorry she was going, even if it was only pretence. At that moment Joyce felt that she loved them all, but would never, willingly, see any of them again. And so she left them.

"Well, that's that, anyway," thought Joyce, as the train bore her away from Laykington. "As people say when they swim the Channel, 'I'm glad I've done it, but I'm glad it's over.'—And now for 'the wider life' . . ."

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